

# BOVINGTON GARRISON & THE ARMOUR CENTRE: A HISTORY





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&  
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# FROM RIFLE RANGE TO GARRISON

AN ESSAY ON BOVINGTON CAMP (1899-1925)

BY

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# INTRODUCTION

This essay was written as an exercise in producing a piece of local history from primary sources. As such, it formed part of the course of the Southampton University Diploma in Education.

When the work began, I had no idea of what period in time I should be covering. Having discovered, however, that the land on which the camp is built was sold to the War Office in 1899, this particular year became the obvious starting point. I later decided to make 1925 the finishing date because by then Bovington Camp, after many years of uncertainty, had become firmly established as the Tank Corps Centre with its own flourishing community of servicemen and civilians. The aim of the essay, then, is to trace the development of Bovington during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

I began my research at the beginning of 1969 and quickly discovered that I had started two or three years too late. All the old records which I had hoped to find in the offices of the Ministry of Public Building and Works, for instance, has recently been destroyed. Then again, a number of old men who had known Bovington before the First World War had recently died. As I worked, moreover, many of the original wooden buildings on the camp were being demolished as a result of a modernisation scheme. When I began the essay, in face, it was possible to correlate old maps with existing buildings; by the time I had finished, however, this was no longer easy.

As the essay was intended to be primarily a piece of local history, I approached the subject first from the civilian rather than the military aspect. I began by reading all I could about the background of Bovington in the accepted authorities such as John Hutchins' "The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset" and the Victoria County History of the area. I also read the various learned periodicals of the county. In the first two I found some useful information regarding the antiquity and the changing pattern of ownership of the place. In the periodicals, however, I found very little material; in fact, I found only one reference to Bovington in the Dorset Year Books and only one in the "Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club". I also found that there were few references to Bovington in any of the modern guide books to the county. It seems that local writers like to pretend that the camp does not really exist. One authoress, for instance, told me that she had not mentioned the place in her book because "Bovington seems so much an asphalt jungle".

When I moved from secondary to primary sources I found that there was still a scarcity of material. There is only one reference to Bovington in the county museum library – referring to a British bowl that was found on the camp in 1962 – and there are only two relevant bundles of papers in the county archives. Fortunately, one of these contains a small, incomplete collection of letters referring to the proposed sale of part of the Moreton Estates to the War Office. These letters are dated from 1896 to 1898 and they gave me the first clue to the date of the commencement of the camp. Armed with this information, I extended my enquiries to the Ministry of Defence Land Agent in Dorchester and to the present owner of the Moreton Estates.

The Land Agent, Mr CHH. Kentish, FRICS, provided me with invaluable assistance in the form of a copy of the conveyance of the original purchase of land and a map illustrating the relevant area. Commander RHCF Frampton RN, of Moreton House, was equally helpful.

Although he could not produce any correspondence relating to the original sale he did show me his grandfather's diary which contained numerous snippets of information which I could not have discovered elsewhere.

Having established when the camp was started, I set out to discover how it expanded and what it was used for. The first of these tasks was comparatively easy because the local Land Office contains all the conveyances of land bought and sold since 1899; it does not, however, contain records of the requisitioning of land by wartime regulations, so that I have not always been able to check the extent of these. The second of these tasks was more difficult because the Land Office does not concern itself with land use. To discover what buildings existed at any particular time I had hoped to use MPBW sources but, as I have already explained, these had been destroyed.

There is in MPBW offices at Bovington, however, a framed plan of the original buildings and from this I have built up a picture by using a series of Ordnance Survey maps, by reading contemporary descriptions of the camp and by talking both to soldiers who were stationed at Bovington before 1925 and to the local civilian shopkeepers, some of whom have been trading in the area since the First World War.

According to the original conveyance, Bovington Camp was to be used as a rifle range and an exercise training area. I have confirmed that this is indeed what it was used for by talking to elderly inhabitants of the locality and by studying the back numbers of the Dorset County Chronicle. I am indebted to this newspaper for a detailed description of the rifle range when it was first used in 1900 and for considerable information relating to the local scene immediately following the outbreak of war in 1914. Unfortunately, Bovington did not receive as much publicity at that time as some other wartime camps, especially those at Wareham and Swanage.

The reason for this, presumably, was that such towns had regular newspaper correspondents who continued to produce their weekly columns, describing the activities of the newly arrived military personnel, whereas Wool, the nearest village to Bovington, had no such person.

For the period 1914-16, I obtained most of my information from military sources. From the Ministry of Defence I discovered which infantry battalions had been stationed in the vicinity in 1914 and I then consulted the relevant regimental histories and war diaries. In most cases these do not commence until the time of the arrival of the battalions in France but a few mention Bovington and from these I was able to piece together an account of what went on there from September 1914 until the middle of 1915.

Towards the end of 1916 Bovington became the tank depot. For the next three years there are no contemporary accounts of the camp. I have been unable to find, for instance, a single reference to Bovington in the Dorset County Chronicles for the years 1917 and 1918. The reason for this dearth of material is that the tank was the current "secret weapon" and, as such, was unmentionable in print. For this period I have relied mainly on histories and reminiscences which were published immediately after the war.

Chief among these were “Tank Notes”, a history of tank development issued in weekly notes by the War Office; various personal accounts printed in the Tank Corps Journal and two typescript histories of the two most important units at Bovington – the Central Schools and the Central Workshops.

These histories are contained in the archives of the Tank Museum. The curator of this museum, Col PH Hordern DSO OBE, was very helpful in providing material, particularly in the form of maps and photographs. He also allowed me access to the collection of memoirs which the museum possesses. These, however, are generally concerned more with the technical and tactical developments of tanks than with training; consequently Bovington receives little more than passing mention in any of them. One book in the library which has been of considerable use, however, is “Tinned Soldiers” which was written by Alec Dixon who was a post-war recruit to the Tank Regiment and who spent most of his military career as a non-commissioned officer at Bovington.

The sources which have proved most valuable for the period 1919-25 have undoubtedly been the monthly issues of the Tank Corps Journal. At first glance these appeared to be of little historical value but by probing deeply and then checking my deductions with numerous old soldiers who still live in the district I was able to gather much useful material of the contemporary scene. Another invaluable source of information for this period has been the original log-book of the Bovington council school which was kindly lent to me by the headmaster.

Among the retired military personnel who have read the essay in draft form I am particularly grateful to Captain VA Nobes RTR who made a number of suggestions which I have incorporated in the text. Generally, old soldiers have found little to criticise. So I think I can safely claim that the essay is authentic. I also believe that it is original in that I have been unable to discover any previously written history of the camp. I cannot claim, however, that it is complete. The answers to two questions in particular have continually eluded me – why did the War Office require Bovington as a military camp in the first place? And why was Bovington chosen as the Tank Training Centre in 1916? Even the Public Records Office has been unable to help me find the answers to these questions. I am still searching.



# FROM RIFLE RANGE TO GARRISON

## I – PRE 1914

Bovington is now acknowledged throughout the military world as the “home” of the Royal Armoured Corps. So associated has its name become with tanks that many people believe that the camp originated during the First World War following the invention of the tank. Ralph Wightman, for instance, refers to the time “when the Army came to Bovington Heath in the 1914-18 war”<sup>1</sup>. In fact, however, the Army first came to Bovington at the very end of the nineteenth century when part of the heathland was taken over as a military exercise area. It is my intention in this essay to describe how the camp developed from this modest beginning to the large permanent camp it had become by the middle nineteen-twenties.

One writer believes that the military history of Bovington is even older than this; that it dates, in fact, from the Roman invasion. He suggests that: “It is probable that the Romans quartered several legions on Bovington Heath when Dorchester was a Roman town, and earthworks exist in the vicinity which seem to indicate the site of a large Roman camp”<sup>2</sup>. There certainly are a number of barrows in the neighbourhood of the camp but these date back to the Bronze Age<sup>3</sup>. Again, in 1962, a bead-rim pedestalled bowl was discovered at a depth of three feet in the centre of the modern camp complex, but this has since been identified as a British bowl<sup>4</sup>. So it would appear that there is no evidence to support the theory that Bovington was once the site of a Roman camp.

Bovington itself is certainly old. The name is Saxon, meaning “the farm of Bofa’s descendants”<sup>5</sup> and the earliest written evidence of its existence is contained in the Domesday Book of 1086 when it was held by Alvrice the huntsman and assessed at four hides<sup>6</sup>. Later, it became part of the Bindon Abbey estates and, as recently as 1842, a note to the Tithe Apportionment mentioned with reference to Bovington Farm that “Modus payable to owner of Bindon Abbey who is the Impropiator”<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> “Portrait of Dorset” (Hale, 1965), p25

<sup>2</sup> “Tank Corps Journal”, Vol VI, No.70 (Feb 1925), p276

<sup>3</sup> According to the Curator of the Dorset County Museum

<sup>4</sup> Brailsford’s Durotrigian Type 2, now in Dorset County Museum (DCM/1962/17)

<sup>5</sup> A Fagersten: “The Place Names of Dorset” (Uppsala, 1933)

<sup>6</sup> Victoria County History of Dorset, Vol III, p.134 (after Eyton)

<sup>7</sup> Dorset Archives, LXII/1

In 1767 Bovington was sold to James Frampton of Moreton<sup>1</sup> and it remained as part of the Moreton estates until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1896 the Frampton family was approached by the War Office with a view to the sale of part of the heathland as a military training area<sup>2</sup>. In April 1897 the Bishop of Salisbury announced to his Diocesan Synod that “the War Office has secured a range of land, six miles in extent, near Wool, for the purposes of a militia encampment and other military work”<sup>3</sup>. But this news was premature. The negotiations continued for another two years and the deal was not finally concluded until 16 February 1899, when the War Office agreed to pay Mrs Louisa Mary Featherstonhaugh Frampton £4,300 for just over one thousand acres of the “Heathland in the Parishes of Bovington, Turnerspuddle, Affpuddle, Wool and Elsewhere in the County of Dorset”, which land “shall be used as a Rifle Range or for any military use or purpose or any other use or purpose of the Government or any Department thereof”<sup>4</sup>.

Building the range involved considerable work in excavating, trenching, throwing up of earth and levelling it down. The work began in earnest on 21st September 1899 and, at one time, one hundred and twelve men were engaged upon it, working under the direction of Captain Skey of the Royal Engineer Department at Weymouth. The range was from one hundred and fifty to two hundred yards wide and one thousand yards long. It contained twenty butts and employed the most modern techniques, similar to those in use at Bisley. A former lance corporal in the Dorset Regiment, Nr Woodrow of Bryantspuddle brickyards, was appointed as first caretaker of the range<sup>5</sup>.

The site of the camp was one mile to the south of the butts. The first men to use the camp were one thousand one hundred and fourteen men of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Southern Reserves who arrived for six weeks’ military training and musketry practice on 4th June 1900. On that same day the first firing was carried out on the ranges – the men of “B” (Wareham) Company 1st Volunteer Battalion, Dorset Regiment<sup>6</sup>.

Firewood for the camp was obtained from the Framptons whose estate diary for 1900 contains the information that two hundred and thirty-six tons of firewood were sold to the military at twenty seven shillings and six pence per ton. Water was originally brought from Bere Regis in a horse drawn tanker by Mr Charles Cobb, who had secured the haulage contract<sup>7</sup>.

Soon, however, a well was sunk to a depth of eighty four feet and water was pumped up by an oil-driven engine and emptied into three iron tanks each with a capacity of three thousand gallons. From these tanks the water flowed through pipes to the camp where hydrants or stand-pipes were erected, one hundred yards apart<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> John Hutchins: “The History of Dorset” (3rd Ed), p360

<sup>2</sup> Dorset Archives, D29/E24

<sup>3</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, d. 29 April 1897, p8

<sup>4</sup> Extracts from Conveyance; cf. WO Land Agent’s File, “Dorchester 11/89”

<sup>5</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, d 14th June 1900, p6

<sup>6</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, d 14th June 1900, p7

<sup>7</sup> B Kerr: “Bound to the Soil” (J Baker, 1968), p343

<sup>8</sup> Moreton Estate Diary for 1900





A map of the original camp area purchased on 16th February 1899  
 By permission of MOD Land Agent

At this time the military authorities owned no permanent buildings, the camp consisting of “a modest collection of tents”<sup>1</sup>, but before long they built at the camp’s main cross roads, next to the estate keeper’s cottage, a low brick bungalow for the use of the range warden. The keeper’s cottage had been let to Purchase Brothers for use as a shop for the sale of aerated drinks, groceries and other provisions to the troops<sup>2</sup>. It was also used initially by the officers whilst they were waiting for their mess to be got ready. Later two extra rooms were added and used as a post office and a canteen; and stables were erected nearby. The cottage was let on an original lease for three years, at forty pounds per annum, but the lease was obviously extended because in 1907 Purchase Brothers were listed as “Officers’ Mess caterers, general providers and tent kit suppliers”<sup>3</sup>.

To ensure that civilians did not stray into the danger areas, sentries were posted at Gallows Hill, Clouds Hill and the other entrances to the camp area when firing was taking place<sup>4</sup>. But there seems to have been little contact between the military and the local civilian population. The present owner of the Moreton Estate, Commander RHCF Frampton RN, remembers being taken to an army sports day in approximately 1906, but there is only one reference to the camp in the pre-war Wool Parish Council Minutes. These record that “Complaints having been made by the Military Authorities that the rubbish deposited by R Short (the village rubbish collector) from this parish in Wool Heath was a nuisance and dangerous, it was decided that Mr Spicer and Mr Morris be asked to meet Captain Humphries on the spot and see what could be done”<sup>5</sup>. As a result of this meeting Mr Short was ordered to bury the rubbish at a cost of two pounds<sup>6</sup>.

It must be remembered that the population of Wool at this time was less than five hundred<sup>7</sup> and that the homes of these people were in that small part of the modern village which is clustered around the Black Bear Inn<sup>8</sup>.

There is no composite record of which regiments used the training area but one of the earliest was certainly the 2nd Battalion of the Dorsetshire Regiment. They carried out their musketry and battalion training at Bovington during their stay at Portland between 1901 and 1903<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> B Kerr: “Bound to the Soil” (J Baker, 1968), p343

<sup>2</sup> Moreton Estate Diary for 1900

<sup>3</sup> Kelly’s Directory, 1907

<sup>4</sup> Captain VA Nobes RTR (in conversation)

<sup>5</sup> Wool Parish Council Minutes, d 8th June 1910

<sup>6</sup> Wool Parish Council Minutes, d 2nd November 1910

<sup>7</sup> 1901 Census: Wool – population 497 living in 114 houses

<sup>8</sup> OS Map (1902 Edition)

<sup>9</sup> CT Atkinson: “The Dorsetshire Regiment” Vol II, pt 3 (Oxford 1947) p103

The last regiment to use it was undoubtedly the Royal Welsh Fusiliers who were encamped there in the summer of 1914<sup>1</sup>. At other times it was used as a territorial summer camp and, from the very beginning, as the venue for the annual meeting of the Dorset Territorial Rifle Association. The latter was quite a social event when “the sergeants” mess was placed at the disposal of any competitor who required refreshments, hospitality being dispensed ad lib”<sup>2</sup>.

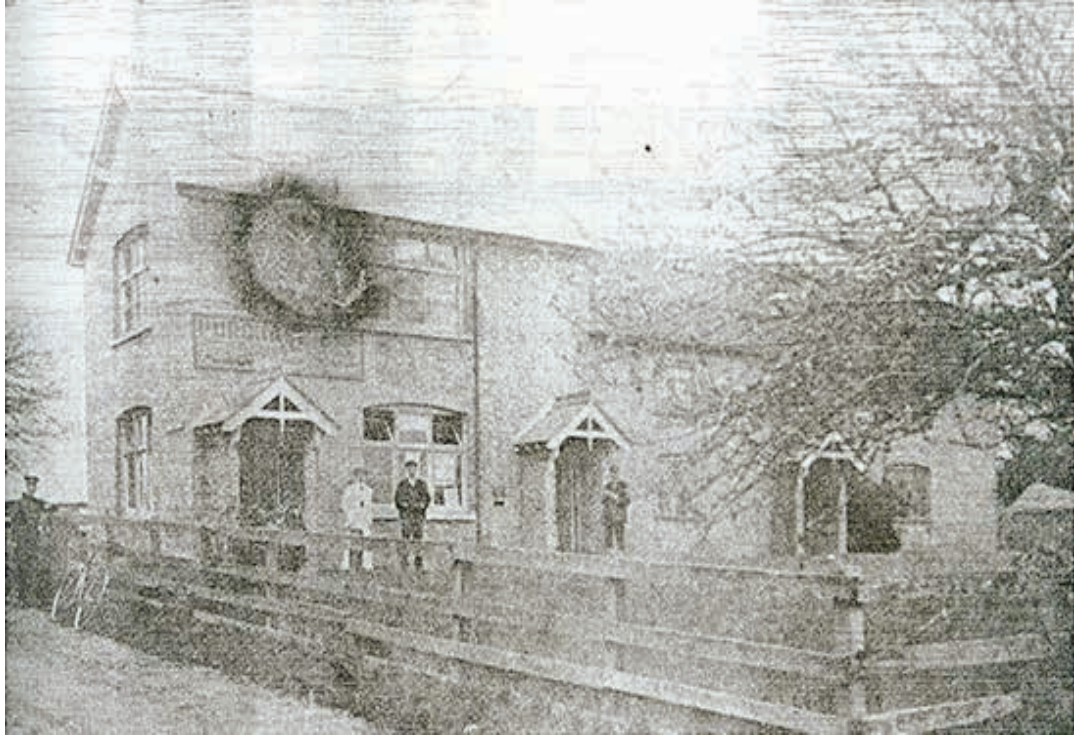
The camp at Bovington must certainly have fulfilled a military need because twice its area was extended. In 1907, two hundred and ninety acres of Chamberlyne’s Heath were bought and, in 1910, a further fifteen and three-quarter acres of the same heath; both from Colonel EM Mansel-Pleydell<sup>3</sup>. Even this extended acreage was to prove insufficient, however, when new uses were found for Bovington during the First World War.

<sup>1</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle” d 23rd July 1914, p13

<sup>2</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle” d 18th June 1914, p13

<sup>3</sup> Southern Command Files, 8/79 and 8/1181





Purchases' Store and Post Office (1906)  
*Loaned by F. Smith, Bovington Village*

## II – 1914-1916

When the First World War began in August 1914 one of the first tasks of the British Government was to increase the size of the army. The Cabinet was not in favour of conscription so Kitchener had to rely on volunteers. He hoped to get one hundred thousand in the first six months and, perhaps, five hundred thousand altogether. This total was, in fact, the most that the existing factories could equip with rifles and uniforms. This modest plan, however, was submerged by a wave of patriotic enthusiasm. Five hundred thousand volunteered in the first month and recruitment ran at over one hundred thousand per month for the next eighteen months<sup>1</sup>. Locally, between 8th August and 5th September, two thousand, two hundred and fifty eight volunteers were accepted<sup>2</sup> and during the next fortnight one thousand volunteers reported to the barracks at Dorchester where they were divided into companies and then marched off to a temporary camp situated on the heathland between Bovington and Wareham<sup>3</sup>.

The army was not prepared for such a flood of recruits. There were insufficient permanent camps available and every existing temporary camp was brought into immediate service. Bovington was one of these. This was allocated as the initial training camp of the newly formed 17th Infantry Division. The official “History of the Dorsetshire Regiment” explains that:

“The 17th Division belonged to the north. In a happy moment the War Office turned an eye on Dorset and sent 12,000 men to invade the windy, sunlit spaces round Bovington and Wareham. It might be a distant journey but here was ideal ground for training; wide hills, great heaths and tracts of pinewoods. So the twelve battalions drawn from between Trent and Tweed were exiled from their crowded cities, or their fields and farms, to learn the business of war where there was little temptation or opportunity to do anything else”<sup>4</sup>.

Not that the recruits were slow to discover where temptation lay – picket-dodging to Bournemouth quickly became a fine art and “the regular conception of discipline, particularly as regards the time of return to camp at night, was slow of growth.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AJP Taylor: “The First World War” (Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p40

<sup>2</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, 10th September 1914, p3

<sup>3</sup> “The History of the Dorsetshire Regiment (1914-1919)” (Ling, Dorchester, 1932), p102

<sup>4</sup> p102

<sup>5</sup> Major General JC Latter: “The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers” Vol I Ch 1

The 17th Division consisted of the 58th, 51st and 52nd Brigades. The 50th Brigade, which consisted of the 6th Dorsets, the 7th East Yorks, the 10th West Yorks and the 7th Yorks, was encamped at Worgret, between Bovington and Wareham. The 51st Brigade, consisting of the 7th Lincolns, the 7th Borders, the 8th South Staffs and the 10th Sherwood Foresters, and the 52nd Brigade, consisting of the 12th Manchesters, the 9th West Ridings, the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers and the 10th Lancashire Fusiliers, were sent to Bovington itself.

Their first impression of the place was not favourable. The historian of the 10th Lancashire Fusiliers, for instance, records that “The Battalion was billeted in Bury until 6th September when it moved to Bovington, near Wool, in Dorset, where the first night was spent on the verge of the road, no tents or rations having arrived”<sup>1</sup>. The Northumberland Fusiliers arrived on the same day and they too found that “Little preparation had been made, and the sky was the extra blanket for the night”<sup>2</sup>. Two weeks later the situation had improved only slightly and the editor of the local newspaper felt justified in highlighting the facts with the headline: “Kitchener’s Army stranded with no food or covering”<sup>3</sup>.

The first tents actually arrived on 9th September but there were enough for only half of the troops on the camp and, as the weather was very wet, many of the recruits fell sick; in fact, many were admitted to hospital with pneumonia and pleurisy and one young soldier of the Manchesters was buried at Wool Parish Church on 26th October having died from pneumonia<sup>4</sup>.

“The Sherwood Foresters were a rough crowd of men in civvies, all eager to get their khaki, lay hands on a rifle and get across to France”<sup>5</sup>. But they had to temper their enthusiasm: not only were tents lacking, there was neither khaki nor a single weapon. The first uniforms were issued on 20th September but these had seen previous service and were in a threadbare condition. The first consignment of rifles arrived on 1st October, but these were a mixture of Lee Enfields and Lee Metfords dating from 1890 and were suitable for drill purposes only. In fact, it was not until March 1915 that a limited supply of modern service rifles arrived and it was not until May 1915, just prior to their departure for France, that the battalions received their full quota of arms and equipment.

<sup>1</sup> Major General JC Latter: “The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers” Vol I Ch.1

<sup>2</sup> “The Historical records of the 9th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers” (Newcastle, 1928) p2

<sup>3</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, 17th September 1914, p5

<sup>4</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, 29th October 1914, p7

<sup>5</sup> An unpublished typewritten history of 10th Bn The Sherwood Foresters 1914-19, Ch1, available in RHQ





Four Sherwood Foresters at Bovington Camp (September 1914)  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*

Living in Poole at this time was a Mr RA Holland who had recently moved to Dorset from Newcastle. He visited Bovington to renew acquaintanceship with those of his old friends who had joined the Northumberland Fusiliers and then described the experience in a letter to the "Newcastle Evening Mail". The newspaper, in turn, reported:

"Mr Holland says that he found the camp pitched in a large field situated on the slope of a hill (i.e. Bunker's Hill). The tents were placed high up and the remainder of the field – a large plateau sort of patch – was reserved for drill, while at the bottom of the field were the camp fires and cooking offices...  
"Mr Holland adds: 'When I arrived at the grounds, seated on top of a pile of goods on a tradesman's cart, having thus covered the three miles from Wool Station, I saw the boys at drill. None were yet in uniform ... The footgear of the Quaysiders was much changed from the days of fancy shoes and ornamental socks. Their shoes now are – well – entirely strangers to blacking or polish, and are mostly covered with mud.'"<sup>1</sup>

On 13th September four thousand more recruits, mainly from Manchester and Stockport, arrived in four long trains at Wool station. From there they marched to Bovington, bringing the numbers in the camp to eleven thousand<sup>2</sup>. Shortly after this there was a great improvement in the weather and the recruits made rapid strides in their military training. They spent eight hours a day doing drill, musketry and physical training and as soon as they had finished work they began playing football. In the evenings many of them retired to the YMCA where they were able to obtain refreshments, write letters, buy stamps and play any of a number of games that were provided.

Almost nightly there was a concert which was provided by local artists from as far afield as Bournemouth or by the camp's own brass band<sup>3</sup>. This band was the first to be formed in Kitchener's Army<sup>4</sup> and it was largely the result of the efforts of the vicar of East Stoke, Reverence PA Butler, who had acted as Chaplain to the camp for a number of years. Finding that among his new flock of north countrymen he had a number of skilled musicians who had been unable to bring their instruments into the army with them, he himself bought a set of instruments for £40 and then appealed through the columns of the local newspaper for subscriptions to pay for them<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> "The Historical Records of the 9th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers" (Newcastle, 1928), Appendix I

<sup>2</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 17th September 1914, p5

<sup>3</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 22nd October 1914, p7

<sup>4</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 25th November, p16

<sup>5</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 8 October, p13

This band not only gave concerts in the YMCA, it also played occasionally at the evening services in East Stoke church<sup>1</sup> and more frequently on route marches and at church parades.

Church parades were held weekly. Whilst there were facilities for all denominations to hold their services on the camp, the Roman Catholics organised a historic service when, on Sunday 20th September, one thousand, one hundred and seventy soldiers from the camps at Bovington and Worgret celebrated Mass in the ruins of the old abbey church at Bindon Abbey. This was the greatest number of Roman Catholics to have gathered together at the abbey since the Reformation<sup>2</sup>.

As winter approached, the weather deteriorated and mud became an almost insurmountable problem. One fusilier wrote home: "It is pouring in torrents, parade ground in floods – our tent is not particularly comfortable, 15 men, 15 kitbags, 30 blankets, 15 greatcoats – men coming in and out in large wet boots ...<sup>3</sup>. The army authorities decided to remedy this situation and they promised that by the end of October all the troops in Dorset who were under canvas would be accommodated in wooden huts<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately for the 52nd Brigade, which was the remaining brigade at Bovington, the 51st having moved recently to Lulworth, the authorities under-estimated the strain this would impose on the local labour and timber resources.

Four hundred carpenters and other artisans were employed in the Wareham area<sup>5</sup> and they managed to complete the construction of huts at Worgret camp before the end of the year, but the programme at Bovington fell well behind schedule and it was, therefore, decided to move the troops into civilian billets in Wimborne. Three days later the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers followed to Canford and Broadstone, and the 12th Manchesters to Ferndown and Kinson<sup>6</sup>. The battalions expected to remain in these billets for a period of five to eight weeks but, in fact, the hutted camp at Bovington was not ready for their return until the second half of March 1915.

The construction of a hutted camp marks the end of Bovington as merely an exercise area; henceforth it contained buildings and could be pinpointed on a map. The layout of the camp was similar to that what it is today in that the buildings were contained in a long rectangle stretching from east to west across the southern tip of the originally purchased area of land

<sup>1</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 25th November, p16

<sup>2</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 1st October 1914, p10

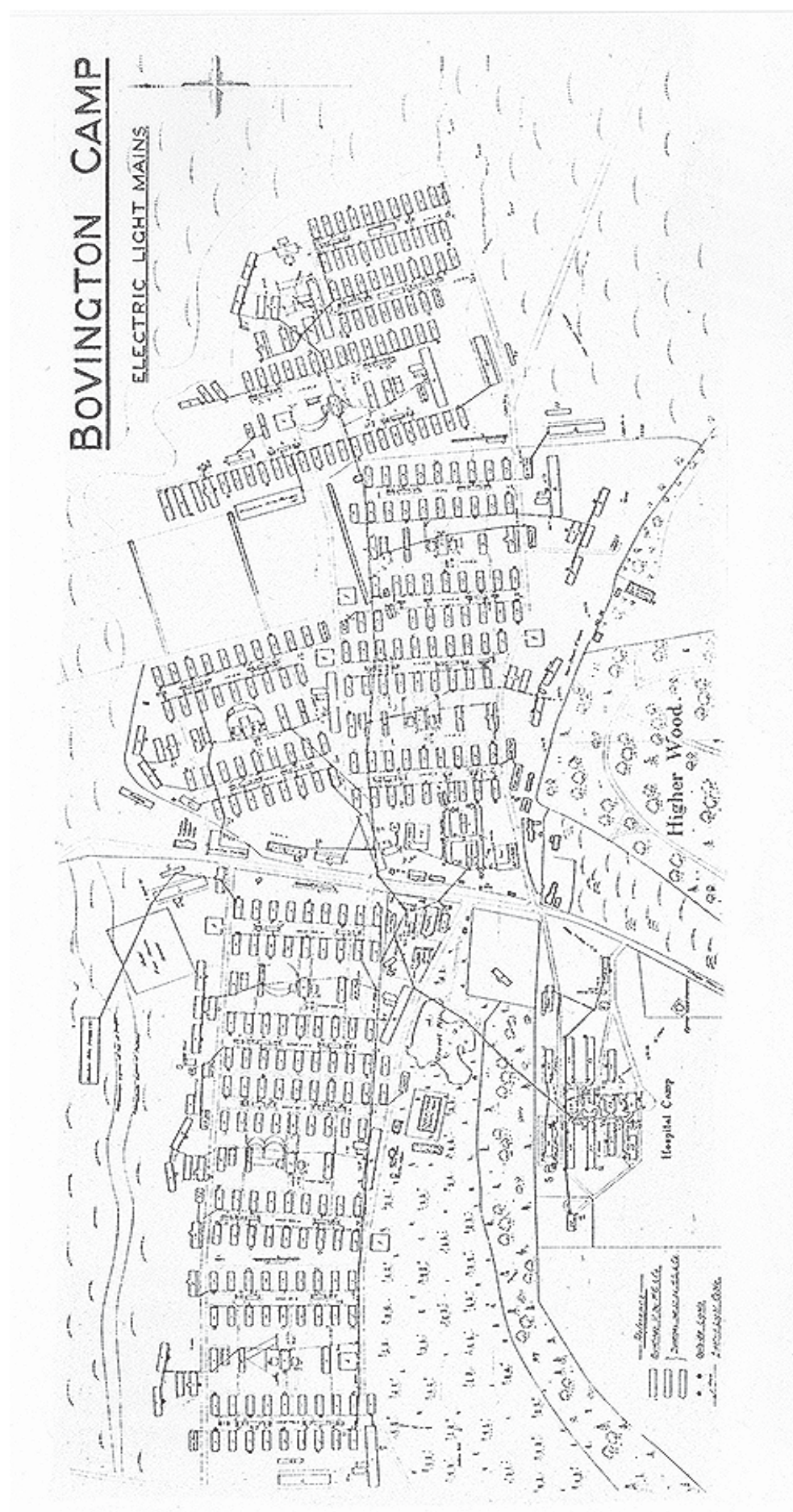
<sup>3</sup> "The Historical Records of the 9th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers", p4

<sup>4</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 1st October 1914, p8

<sup>5</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 3rd December 1914, p13

<sup>6</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle" – 3rd December 1914, p10





Plan of original camp buildings (1915)  
By permission of the Superintendent MPBW

but extending beyond this boundary. This was possible because the original area had been extended since the outbreak of war by requisitioning; land at Snelling Farm on the Moreton Estate, for instance, had been taken over for the construction of two additional rifle ranges<sup>1</sup>, the remains of which are still visible.

A plan for the camp at this time, now on display in the offices of the Ministry of Public Building and Works at Bovington, shows that the men's billets were laid out in "lines", each set of "lines" being designated to one battalion, each battalion consisting of eleven hundred men. The "lines" were lettered "A" to "H" from the west, with the Wool-Clouds Hill road running northwards through the camp between "C" and "D" lines. The sleeping huts were designed to accommodate thirty men and a few of these huts, frequently renovated externally and reconstructed internally, still exist on the western side of the main road as sub-standard married quarters. In addition to the sleeping accommodation, there were huts for the usual variety of military purposes – guardrooms, churches and canteens – and, less usually, a large hospital which was built to the south of the original area of the camp on another piece of land which has been requisitioned from the Moreton Estate.

As soon as the huts were ready the battalions returned from their civilian billets and their war training at last began in earnest. A divisional "Field Day" was held on 30th March and this became the forerunner of many, including night operations and trench exercises. These divisional exercises took place outside the boundaries of the camp, bringing the 52nd Brigade in contact with the 50th and 51st. They do not appear to have been particularly arduous to judge from one account which records that:

"It was by Seven Barrows that twenty-four hours were spent in trenches, units relieving in the dark. They were odd trenches with no parapets and so narrow that two men, even if thin, could not pass one another. It was safe to sleep in the open and easy to raid across No Man's Land for material, for there was no enemy or wire. Nevertheless, they served a purpose vaguely"<sup>2</sup>

In April 1915, a new feature of the training introduced at Bovington was the preparation of section officers and non-commissioned officers to take control of machine gun sections. By the end of the following month, the 17th Division had completed its training and moved off to various centres prior to sailing for France in July. Its time in Dorset had been "one of alarms,

<sup>1</sup> Moreton Estate Diary for 1914.

<sup>2</sup> "History of the Dorsetshire Regiment (1914-1919), p105





Wooden huts now used as married quarters

of rumours of German raids or intended raids, of spy stories, of reports of strange lights and of sudden rousings of emergency companies and patrols to investigate them”<sup>1</sup>.

One of the units to move into Bovington following the departure of the 17th Division was the 7th (Reserve) Battalion of the Dorsetshire Regiment. The duty of this battalion was not so much to prepare bodies of troops for the front line as to secure recruits locally and to train them individually as reserves for those battalions of the Regiment which were fighting overseas, particularly the 5th and 6th Battalions<sup>2</sup>. The 7th Battalion continued to carry out these duties at Bovington until its disbandment on 25th August 1916<sup>3</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Australian Army had begun to use Bovington as a “Command Depot” where men who had been wounded in France could be toughened up for further service following their period in hospital<sup>4</sup>. Men were posted to Bovington on an individual basis rather than a unit one but the number of individuals increased considerably as a result of the Battle of the Somme. In October 1916, the camp at Worgret, Wareham, also began to receive convalescing Australians. Initially this was intended merely to receive the overflow from other camps but it quickly took over Bovington’s role as a “Command Depot” because by then the War Office was busily making new plans for Bovington.

<sup>1</sup> “History of the Lancashire Fusiliers” – Vol I

<sup>2</sup> H Pouncy: “The Dorset in the Great War” – Dorset Year Book (1916-17), p74

<sup>3</sup> “History of the Dorsetshire Regiment (1914-1919)”, p190

<sup>4</sup> “The Australian Official History of World War I”, Vol III

### III - 1916-1918

Most of the infantry men trained at Bovington between 1914 and 1916 were posted to the Western Front where they quickly became engulfed in the Flanders mud. Since the first battle of Ypres in 1914 the fighting had reached stale-mate; quick-firing field guns and machine guns used defensively had forced both sides to seek safety by means of their spades rather than their rifles. Both sides were seeking some new method of finding a way through or over the opposing barbed wire and trench systems. Among many schemes suggested to the British authorities was the one that an armoured vehicle on caterpillar tracks should be used.

On 28th September 1915, a wooden model of such a vehicle, known at “Big Willie” to distinguish it from an earlier, smaller prototype called “Little Willie”, was accepted by a Joint Naval and Military Committee as a basis upon which construction might proceed. On 29nd February 1916, the completed experimental machine was put through its official trials at Hatfield before representatives of the Army Council and General Headquarters France and on 8th February the production of these machines was officially ordered. In March, it was decided to form a small unit of the Machine Gun Corps, to be known as the “Heavy Section”, to man the new machines. Colonel ED Swinton was appointed to command this unit, with his headquarters in London and his training centre at Bisley. The latter was soon moved to Elvedon, near Thedford in Norfolk, where conditions of the utmost secrecy were more easily imposed.

On 13th August 1916, the first detachment of thirteen tanks left for France. Other small detachments quickly followed and by the middle of September tanks were in action on the Somme. In their first operation on 15th September they were used over unfavourable terrain and they were not as successful as had been hoped. They did, however, show their potential; they proved that the principle of the machine was sound and that with certain mechanical improvements it could be a great success. Haig immediately asked the War Office for a further 1000 tanks, suggesting that they should have improved armour and be of a heavier type. On 29th September, the War Office agreed to this request. They also decided to increase the Establishment of the Heavy Section from the four companies in France to four battalions, each of three companies, and to raise five new battalions in England. The immense training programme which this expansion would necessitate would prove far too great for the small camp at Elvedon, so Colonel Swinton set out to look for a fresh training ground for tanks. The result was that the history of Bovington as an infantry training camp came to an end.



In his autobiography, Colonel Swinton reports that:

“Next day, with two officers from the War Office, I made a tour of inspection to find a more suitable training ground than Elvedon for the projected enlarged Heavy Section. This visit resulted in the establishment of the unit at Bovington, Dorset, which has ever since remained its centre.”<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Swinton does not explain why he chose Bovington but a war diary of the time emphasises the suitability of his choice: “The wooded country around Bovington is particularly adapted to the training of tank battalions, the rolling downs, the woods and the small streets being very similar to and as equally deserted as the battlefields of France.”<sup>2</sup>

On 20th October 1916, Brigadier-General F Gore-Anley DSO, was appointed Administrative Commander of the Tank Training Centre, Bovington Camp, and on 27th October the whole of the establishment at Elvedon began to move to Dorset. Bovington at this time was still the simple wooden hatted camp that had been designed to accommodate six infantry battalions. The “lines” were re-allocated to hold, from the west, “E” Battalion, Centre Headquarters, “F” Battalion and, on the eastern side of the main road, “G”, “H” and “I” Battalions. There was an immediate problem regarding officers’ accommodation because a tank battalion, then scheduled to be equipped with seventy-two tanks each commanded by a subaltern, contained far more officers than an infantry battalion. Consequently, the subalterns occupied ordinary barracks huts with a row of camp beds down each side and a row of canvas camp washstands down the middle. Furthermore, the officers’ mess was much too small and the junior officers occupied a barrack room as their ante-room.<sup>3</sup>

A much more serious problem concerned the lack of accommodation available for mechanical work because none of the existing buildings was suitable for tank repairs of maintenance. At Elvedon this kind of work had been carried out by 711 Company, Army Service Corps, in a “Standard Mobile Workshop” which had independent, electrically driven tools with the power for the dynamo coming from a small eight horse-power Douglas Engine. On the closure of Elvedon, those members of 711 Company who were not sent to France were posted to Bovington, taking with them their mobile workshop. At first this proved adequate for the work involved because during November only nine tanks were received at Bovington.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maj Gen ED Swinton “Eye Witness” (Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), p292

<sup>2</sup> The History of “E” (5th) Battalion in Tank Corps Journal Vol 2, No14 (June 1920), p48

<sup>3</sup> Colonel GH Brooks: “Bovington Camp, Winter 1916-17”, The RTR 50th Anniversary Souvenir Book (1967), p30

<sup>4</sup> “The History of the Tank Corps Technical Office and Workshops” (Typescript, Jan 1919), p5, (Tank Museum File 104.75)

On arrival the tanks were parked on the “Eastern Parade Ground” which henceforth was called the “Tank Park”. It was situated at the north end of the camp, immediately to the west of the Wool to Clouds Hill road. Two canvas hangars, forty-two feet square, each capable of accommodating two tanks, were obtained to give shelter whilst repairs and replacements were being effected. They were also used initially as the headquarters of the chief technical officer. As they were erected at the south side of the Tank Park, at the foot of a bank, in a hollow – and as it was midwinter – they were prone to become flooded. One engineering officer recalls the situation in these words:

“I arrived at Bovington Camp on 2nd December 1916, having driven up from Wool station in a one-horse wagonette with a lit on it ... I reported to Lt Col Strickland (OC Schools and Workshops). The latter consisted of a canvas aeroplane hangar and a few tents, with only the most primitive tools and other necessary adjuncts. After a short examination as to my capabilities in instructing on the 105 hp Daimler Sleeve Valve Engine, then the standard tank engine, I was placed in charge of such teaching in a canvas hut, carefully sited in the bed of a stream.”<sup>1</sup>

In early 1917 the number of hangars around the Tank Park was increased; three were erected on the east side adjacent to the road and four on the south side. These hangars were quite useful for the heavier repairs such as breaking and renewing tracks, replacing and renewing rollers and sprockets and pinions; but, with earth floors and without lifting equipment, they did not provide the facilities for dismantling engines and gear boxes. This type of work was becoming increasingly necessary as a result of the hard driving the tanks were receiving at the hands of the inexperienced men being instructed. Consequently, sanction was obtained for the erection of a permanent, galvanised iron, steel-framed building at the south-east corner of the Tank Park. Measuring fifty feet by thirty-five feet, this building had a concrete and wood-block floor and an overhead five-ton travelling crane. This made it possible to dismantle engines and gearboxes and to rebush and refit them properly and systematically. For a long time half of this building was used as a tank repair bay and the other half as an engine bay.

At about the same time some old stables situated on the bank immediately behind the hangars were cleared out and converted into a static machine workshop. This contained an eight and a half inch Dempster More lathe, a four foot radial drill, a sensitive drill, a grinding

<sup>1</sup> Brigadier WA Stack: “The Trenches of a Tank Engineer, 1916-18”, The RTR 50th Anniversary Souvenir Book (1967), p61

wheel and a Herbert Power hacksaw. Meanwhile, two field smith's hearths had been fitted up in a galvanised iron, lean-to shed. These were eventually increased to four. These various additions were a great boon in that they enabled many repairs to be effected which previously would have necessitated replacements.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the trainee crews from Elvedon had been joined by numerous drafts of volunteers; some from other branches of the service, some direct from civilian life. The War History of the 6th Battalion records that "During the last weeks in November the men arrived in great numbers, fresh from their civilian occupations. Each day large numbers were marched up from Wool station and passed before the Medical Officers, those who were passed fit being taken in hand by the Quartermaster's Department, and the rejected were sent back to their homes."<sup>2</sup>

Many of the newcomers lacked the mechanical experience of those who arrived from Elvedon. The latter were mainly from the Motor Machine Gun Corps, which had become redundant as its motorcycles and sidecars were of little use in trench warfare. They had been recruited mainly from the motorcycle and cognate industries; they were mechanically-minded and adaptable. They were the sort of men the Heavy Section would have liked to have continued to recruit but by the end of 1916 the Royal Flying Corps and the mechanical transport section of the Army Service Corps were steadily expanding. Both of these had been busily combing the services for engineers and mechanics whilst the Heavy Section, the newest and smallest of such organisations, was given the least priority in the selection of its members. Consequently, "about half joined with the knowledge and experience of the average motorist; the remainder were just plain men."<sup>3</sup>

These plain men soon found that they were in for a very busy time. One of them recalls that "The work to be got through seemed colossal and any who imagined they had come to Bovington for a 'cushy' time were quickly disillusioned."<sup>4</sup> Another, writing for his battalion magazine in France, remembered "How long and wearisome the training seemed! Those bloodless battles on Winfrith Heath ... and those delightful route marches!"<sup>5</sup> The latter were introduced as part of the weekly training in January 1917 and they had such a detrimental effect on the feet of some of the recruits that one of the battalions appointed a medically-trained recruit as battalion-chiropodist at a remuneration of 6d per day above his normal pay.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The History of the Tank Corps Technical Office and Workshops", p6

<sup>2</sup> "The War History of the 6th Battalion" (printed privately, 1919), p2 (available in Tank Corps Museum)

<sup>3</sup> Sir Hugh Elles: "Some Notes on Tank Development during the War" – Tank Corps Journal, Vol III No35 (March 1922), p275

<sup>4</sup> W.F.L.- "Reminiscences of a Gunner of C Coy 8th Battalion" – Tank Corps Journal, Vol I No11 (March 1920), p318

<sup>5</sup> "The Differential" – the magazine of the 8th Battalion (the only Tank Corps magazine)

<sup>6</sup> EM Thwaites: "The Chronicles of an Amateur Soldier" – Tank Corps Journal Vol II, No16 (August 1920), p95

At Elveden the training had been somewhat haphazard because there had been no pattern to work to, but by the time the unit moved to Bovington the experience gained on the Somme had been assimilated and instructors had a clearer idea of what they should teach. In December the War Office issued "Instructions on Training" which introduced a programme planned to ensure a proper balance between the different courses making up a tank crewman's training. Before this could become really effective, however, there was an urgent need to provide more instructors and the first work undertaken by the Heavy Section at Bovington was, in fact, the provision of instructors' courses. These were run by the Centre Headquarters. Meanwhile, the new battalions occupied their time trying to convert their recruits into soldiers by teaching them foot drill and by giving them plenty of physical training.

On the 30th January 1917, authority was given for the establishment of the Administrative Department of the Schools of Instruction which was to consist of the Commandant of Schools, Adjutant and quartermaster. By this date there were sufficient trained instructors and the battalions were ready to commence individual training. This meant that each crewman was to be given courses in tank driving, maintenance, gunnery, signalling, reconnaissance, bombing and the care of pigeons with the object of increasing his technical knowledge and skill so that he could obtain the greatest benefit from the schemes of collective training which were planned to follow the individual training.

The Diving School had already been inaugurated on the "Western Parade Ground" by Lieutenant Colonel H Knothe DSO MC on 25th November 1916. Its premises consisted of part of an infantry miniature rifle range which was used as a lecture room and as a cinema for lantern shows. In this room was fitted a four-cylinder sectional sleeve valve Daimler engine which had previously been used in the 1904 Olympia Exhibition; this was the only model which the school possessed initially.

Training took place on driving "tracks". The driving grounds originally covered about forty acres but this was gradually extended as the number of tanks on strength increased. The "tracks" were arranged so as to give the maximum variety of driving practice. Part of the area was entrenched, part was sparsely wooded and part was artificially created by means of explosives.

Suitable obstacles in the form of jumps built of old tree trunks were erected in various parts of the driving area. These were renewed from time to time. Other obstacles were provided in the form of natural bogs and "unditching" classes became necessary in order to show drivers how to get a tank on the move after it had become stuck in the mud.

Associated with the Driving School was the Mechanical School. Here the first instruction was to teach the students to drive a “jacked up” tank. Having found by experience the effects of putting the levers into the various positions, they then proceeded to the lecture room for an explanation of the engine and the differential. They then returned to the “jacked up” tank for further practice. In this manner, with a mixture of the practical and theoretical, instruction continued until the students were considered proficient to go onto the driving “tracks”. At the end of their driving instruction they returned to the Mechanical School for examination and classification.

Some of the new arrivals in early 1917 were given only ten days to complete their training before being posted urgently to Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Normally, however, a complete course lasted three to four months. Perhaps the best way to describe the full extent of the course is in the words of an officer who was a nineteen year old subaltern at Bovington at that time:

“My first course was Driving and Maintenance and I found it was really good fun. The tanks, although very slow, had a magnificent cross-country performance and as four of the eight members of the crew were required solely to manoeuvre the vehicle, good team work was required to get the best performance. There was no tactical driving and the main object was to get the tank over the most impossible places and when stuck to get going again with the aid of pick, shovel, crow-bar and brute strength. This training was essential as each tank had to be self-supporting and recovery was in its infancy.

“Maintenance was very heavy, especially greasing up, as there were nearly sixty points on the outside of each tank alone which required the grease gun at the end of a day’s run.

“The Gunnery Courses were also carried out at Bovington. These courses included indoor instruction in the huts below “G” Battalion lines and firing with the Lewis guns into the butts on the training ground north of the camp either from the ground or from gun sponsons removed from the driving and maintenance tanks. The six-pounder sub-calibre shooting was carried out in this area from a standing battery firing across a valley.

“My most vivid memory is of the so-called battle practice which took place shortly before the Battalion proceeded overseas. 18 Company marched in the early morning to Lulworth, where they found two or three store tents for the ammunition, a standing Battery of about half a dozen six-pounder guns and a couple of tanks.

<sup>1</sup> Captain VA Nobes RTR (in conversation)

After the whole company had fired their first live shells and a few machine gun rounds from the Battery and from a slowly moving tank, they marched back to Bovington in the evening. "Somewhat apprehensively after tales from my more experienced companions about the kick of the .45 revolver, I was next sent on a Revolver Course which was run by Captain Bill Watkins on a range he had built near "I" Battalion lines.

"The last two courses were mild ones – a Compass Course and a Pigeon Course. The latter was necessary as each tank carried a basket of two pigeons into action. I cannot recall any incident when they proved of much use as either the tank had to be evacuated in a hurry, the pigeons were stupefied by the fumes or they were used up as an emergency ration."<sup>1</sup>

As the training became more intensive so the advantages of the move from Elveden to Bovington became more obvious. There was now plenty of room to make the practice grounds resemble battlefields; trenches, for instance, were dug on Gallows Hill as a replica of a sector of the Western Front<sup>2</sup> so that crews could practice driving across barbed wire from the British lines to the German. In addition to these newly dug trenches, there were plenty of old trenches and a variety of shell and mine craters which had been left by the infantry, so there was no scarcity of rough ground. Instructors took full advantage of these conditions and "the men were at once taken over bad ground until the conditions of this curious progress became things of custom."<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, tanks were not always available for training purposes: the rate of production of machines had not kept pace with the recruitment of men demanded by the expansion programme. In December 1916, for instance, although there were seventy tanks in France<sup>4</sup> only sixteen of these were in working order and "the needs of the big training centre which was setting up at Wool could not at present be met at all."<sup>5</sup> Even as late as April 1917 when a demonstration attack was made on the specially prepared lines of trenches on Gallows Hill, the troops "were unable to have any real tanks for the work, as they could not be spared, so dummies were prepared of canvas and wood."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Col GH Brooks: "Bovington Camp, Winter 1916-17", The RTR 50th Anniversary Souvenir Book (1967), p 31-32

<sup>2</sup> The Tank Museum map section.

<sup>3</sup> CW Ellis & AW Ellis: "The Tank Corps" (Country Life 1919), p40

<sup>4</sup> "Weekly Tank Notes" (issued by the War Office, SD7), ch 5

<sup>5</sup> CW Ellis & AW Ellis: *ibid*, p43

<sup>6</sup> EM Thwaites: "The Chronicles of an Amateur Soldier", Tank Corps Journal Vol II, No16 (August 1920), p95





A map of the trenches on Gallows Hill (1917)

Gradually, however, the number of tanks at Bovington did increase, rising from nine in December to thirteen in January and thirty-six in February. As the number of tanks increases so did the work of the military policy. Melodramatic precautions accompanied the arrival of each new tank. All civilian traffic was stopped between Wool station and Bovington and the inhabitants of Woolbridge Manor and the neighbouring farms and cottages were made to pull their blinds and keep to their back rooms. “Redcaps” on motorcycles preceded the tank on its journey from the station to the camp and any civilian pedestrian encountered was made to stand in a field with his back to the road until the “secret weapon” had passed by.

On one occasion when a shepherd named Patience refused to leave his sheep to do this, soldiers pitched hurdles around him and his sheep and mounted guard over them until the tank had passed.<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, Mr James Spicer who when owned Bovington Farm reported to the military authorities that whilst he had no objection to helping them to keep the secret of the tanks, he wishes they would remove the one which had broken down and been towed into his farmyard where it had been standing for forty-eight hours!

At that time, Bovington Lane was a narrow, undulating, gravelled road but the tanks had to use it because there was no alternative route from the station. The present Cologne Road did not exist until the latter part of the First World War was when it was built by the Pioneer Corps; indeed, it was originally called Pioneer Road. Its name, however, was changed after the war when the names of all roads and houses on the camp were changed to ones associated with the origin and the wartime exploits of the Tank Corps.<sup>2</sup> To reach the southern end of Bovington Lane the tanks had to cross the sixteenth century Wool Bridge, spanning the River Frome, and the narrow, stone bridge over the Lytchett stream.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the warning on the former that “Any person wilfully injuring any part of this county bridge will be guilty of felony and upon conviction liable to be transported for life by the court”, the movement of tanks inevitably caused damage. In July, 1917, for instance, fifty feet of the parapet and of the retaining wall at the northern end of the bridge was damaged.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J Spicer: Letter to Editor of Tank Corps Journal, Vol I, No7 (Nov 1919), p211

<sup>2</sup> Tank Museum File 248.8

<sup>3</sup> Demolished in 1969

<sup>4</sup> Dorset County Council Minute Book, d 7th August 1917



Later that year sixty pounds' worth of damage was done when "the parapet and retaining walls were driven into and damaged by military traffic on 24th December 1917".<sup>1</sup> Eventually, in 6th August 1918, the Dorset County Council agreed to set back a distance of four feet the northern retaining wall and to widen the approach road to the bridge from the north."<sup>2</sup>

The difficulties of road transport had not arisen at Elveden because there a private railway ran into the heart of the camp and vehicles could be delivered under cover, camouflaged as "water tanks". At Bovington a similar line was planned. It was to begin at the northern end of the camp, skirt the camp on the eastern side, passing close to the revolver range, and join the main Weymouth to London line just to the east of Wool station. Work began on the line in 1918, with a labour force of Lulworth-based prisoners of war, but it was not completed until after the end of the war.<sup>3</sup>

To return to the situation in early 1917, so many men continued to arrive at Bovington that other infantry camps at Wareham and Swanage had to be taken over and eventually most of the military accommodation on the Isle of Purbeck housed units of the Heavy Section.<sup>4</sup> On 28th June 1917 the War Office agreed to change the name from the Heavy Section to the Tank Corps and to expand it from nine to eighteen battalions. This planned expansion was almost immediately suspended, however, because of the pressing needs for more tanks, the suspension was removed towards the end of 1917 and "the personnel for the new units were assemble at the Training Centre at Wool."<sup>5</sup>

By then the complement of tanks at Bovington had risen to three hundred and a further expansion in technical buildings had become essential. Ten repair bays were erected with a travelling crane running the length of the bays. The tank park was laid to proper falls, drained and given a hard foundation and a rolled surface. Standard lights were fitted in the park to enable night work to be carried out when necessary. Additionally, a smithy, a foundry, a copper-smith's shop and an acetylene welder's shop were erected to the west of the new machine shop.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dorset County Council Minute Book, d 12th March 1918

<sup>2</sup> Dorset County Council Minute Book, d 6th August 1918

<sup>3</sup> See page 40

<sup>4</sup> DG Browne: "The Tank in Action" (Blackwood) 1920

<sup>5</sup> WO "Weekly Tank Notes", ch5

<sup>6</sup> "The History of Tank Corps Technical Office and Workshops", p6



Map of Bovington-Wool railway



These extensions produced a demand for electricity which was far beyond the capacity of the existing camp generating system. It was necessary, therefore, to install first one and eventually a second additional generating station. Each of these comprised a seventy horse-power, single cylinder, semi-diesel Petter heavy oil engine with fuel and water pumps, each driving a belt-driven dynamo of about forty-five kilowatt capacity. This whole plant was run by the regular Royal Engineer camp servicemen.<sup>1</sup>

A further improvement was made by laying a narrow, eighteen-inch gauge light rail track across the repair park with branches leading into the repair shed, engine bay and equipment store to enable stores and material to be transported more easily. This was found to be especially convenient when the tank park was inches thick in mud after a long spell of wet weather and the passage of many tanks. These various improvements proved adequate for the growing number of repairs which were required as the number of tanks on upkeep grew to five hundred and twenty-nine.<sup>2</sup>

Among the newly formed units which made use of these machines were the first United States tank battalions which arrived at Bovington for training on 9th April 1918 prior to leaving for France via Southampton on 18th August.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the War Office was busily making preparations for an even more massive expansion of the Tank Corps during 1919. Six thousand new tanks were to be built: the size of the Corps was to be doubled by raising at Bovington seventeen new battalions; comprising thirteen British, three Canadian and one New Zealand: and half a million pounds' worth of new technical buildings were sanctioned without even estimates being called for.<sup>4</sup>

These new buildings, which were to include repair bays, repair sheds, engine bays and a machine shop, were necessary because the existing organisation could be extended no further.<sup>5</sup> A complete reorganisation was essential. It was decided, therefore, to devote the whole of the existing parks to Workshops and to move the Schools' park to a site higher up on the heath nearer the driving "tracks".

<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p9

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p9

<sup>3</sup> General Rockenbach: "Operations with the British Offensive" – lecture at US Tank School in 1922 (p53, in notes)

<sup>4</sup> WO Weekly Tank Notes, No42

<sup>5</sup> "The History of Tank Corps Technical Office and Workshops", p10

The largest repair shed was handed over to the equipment officer for storage purposes and the whole block of buildings comprising, smithy, foundry, wheelers' shop and acetylene welders' shop was converted into offices for the technical controller.<sup>1</sup>

The work began in September 1918 under the direction of Brigadier General EB Mathew-Lannowe DSO, who had taken over command of the Tank Corps Training Centre on 1st August from Brigadier General W Glasgow CMG, who had succeeded General Ansley in March 1917.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of November half the building programme had been completed and one Canadian and eight new British battalions had been raised. This brought the total number of officers and men who had completed their tank training at Bovington during the war to twenty-one thousand; fourteen thousand of whom were trained in complete units and seven thousand as individual reinforcements. It also brought the total number of tank units raised at the Central Schools to forty-one.<sup>3</sup>

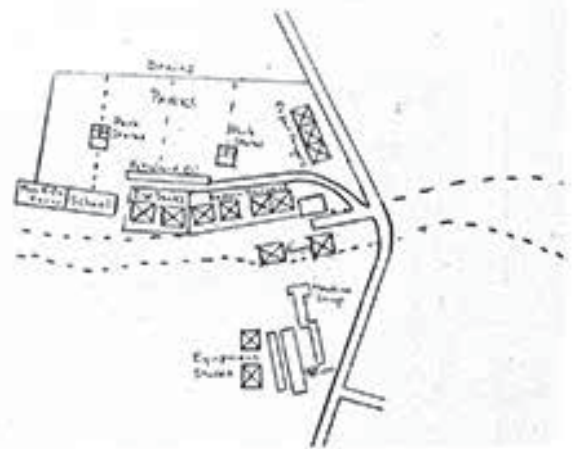
These were:

5 <sup>th</sup> to 26 <sup>th</sup>	British Tank Battalions
1 <sup>st</sup>	Canadian Tank Battalion
301 <sup>st</sup> , 302 <sup>nd</sup> , 303 <sup>rd</sup>	US Tank Battalions
1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup>	British Gun Carrier Companies
1 <sup>st</sup> to 5 <sup>th</sup>	British Tank Supply Companies
Nos 4 and 5	British Tank Advanced Workshops
No 3	British Tank Salvage Company
306 <sup>th</sup> and 317 <sup>th</sup>	US Tank Salvage Companies
3	Headquarters

<sup>1</sup> WO Weekly Tank Notes, No 42

<sup>2</sup> WO Weekly Tank Notes, No 5

<sup>3</sup> WO Weekly Tank Notes, No 42



Three diagrams showing the progressive development of the technical buildings during 1917-18

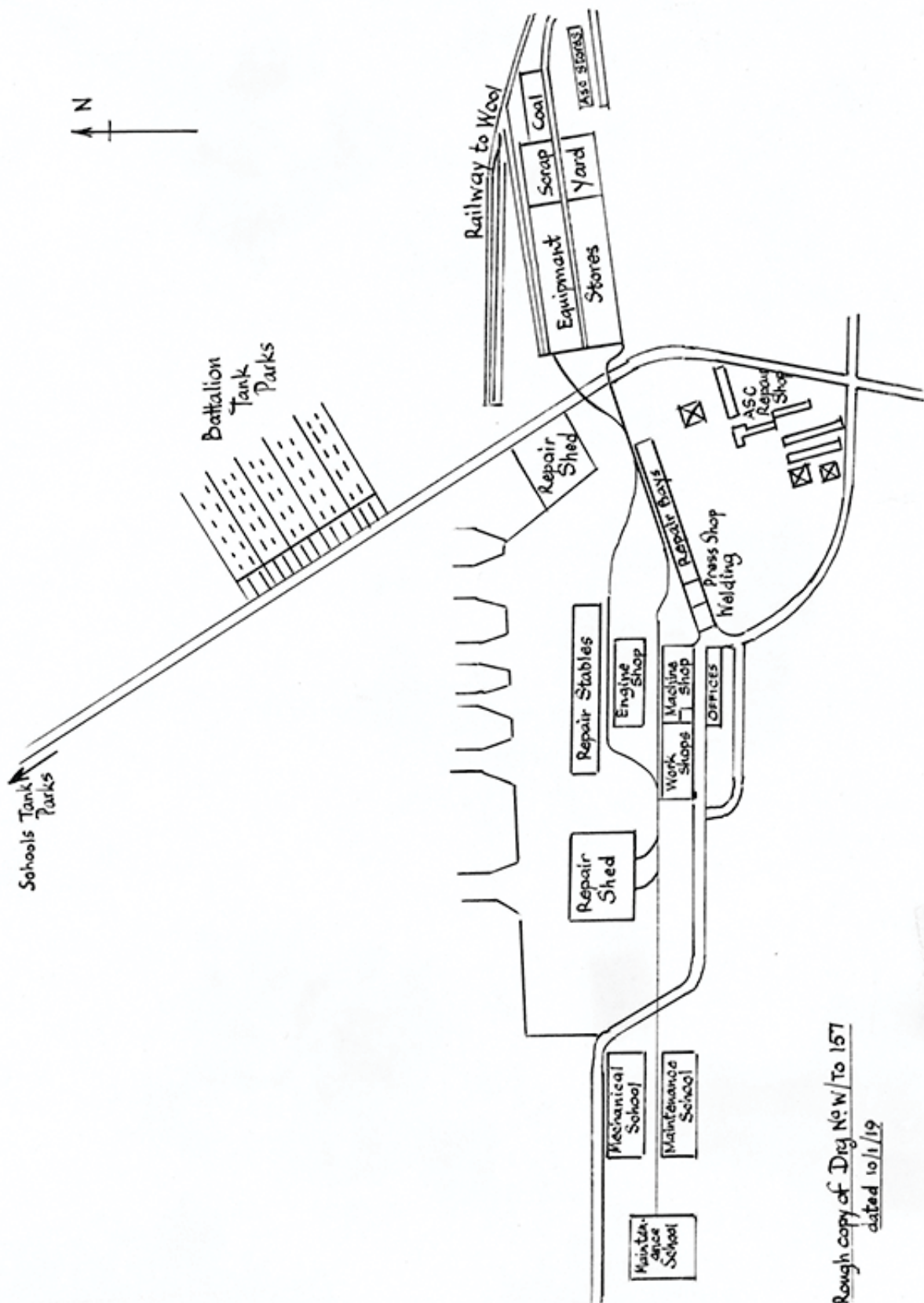


Diagram of technical buildings 1920  
By permission of the Tank Museum

## IV - 1919-1922

A soldier visiting Bovington for the first time in the year following the war found that:

“Bovington was a much larger camp than I imagined it to be. Seen under a formal constellation of electric lamps it appeared as a veritable city of wooden huts set down in a waste of barren moorland. At intervals along our road clumps of secretive pines loomed dark and menacing in the December dusk, and as we drew nearer I saw that these were the outposts of an extensive wood which curved away to the south-west, mantling a shoulder of the ridge on which the camp was built. A long, straight road took up past hangars and corrugated iron sheds, which the driver said were workshops. Beyond them I saw the dark, toad shapes of tanks. We passed a power station, a cinema, shops, a post office, and presently stopped in front of a large barrack store.”<sup>1</sup>

What would become of this huge camp, however, now that the war was over?

“Some people predicted that it would disappear almost as quickly as it came into existence ...”<sup>2</sup>

Certainly there was no peacetime establishment for the place. The domestic accommodation had been erected as a wartime measure and was similar in pattern to scores of temporary camps all over the country. The technical buildings had been built and developed to meet the training and maintenance requirements arising from the increased use of tanks. Obviously the future of Bovington would depend very much upon the future of the Tank Corps. But the future of the Tank Corps was far from obvious; indeed, the end of the war threatened to be the end of the tank.

The tank had been invented in order to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare. Most military authorities believed that no future was likely to deteriorate into the static situation of 1915-1918. If, then, they argued, trench warfare was a thing of the past, so was the tank. In future the emphasis would have to be on mobility – and to most regular soldiers that meant on the cavalry, not on slow, cumbersome machines.

On the day after the Armistice was signed, the War Office cancelled the production of all tanks except the now medium “C” and “D” types. For a long time, however, no equally clear-cut decision was taken on the Tank Corps itself. At the beginning of 1919 the plan was to have a peace establishment of twenty tank battalions to match the project for a large peacetime conscript army. Such an army never materialised.

<sup>1</sup> A Dixon: “Tinned Soldiers” (Jonathan Cope) 1941, p139

<sup>2</sup> “The Bournemouth Times and Directory”, 13th December 1924

The next recommendation of the War Office Committee on Army Reconstruction was that there should be established six tank battalions, one to each infantry division. Then they suggested using tanks in a dual role; as infantry units, to increase penetrative power, and as independent units, to carry out the mobile role that the cavalry had formerly played. In October 1919 the military members of the Army Council decided that the Tank Corps should be a corps d'elite. Three days later they decided that, instead of being a separate corps, officers should be seconded to it from other arms. In November they reverted to the twin-corps system – one corps for infantry support, the other to operate in an independent role. In January 1920 they decided that the tanks should form part of the Royal Engineers. And so the state of flux continued for the next two years until finally it was agreed in the autumn of 1922 that the Tank Corps should become a permanent, separate arm with an establishment of four battalions.<sup>1</sup>

During the first year following the Armistice the Tank Corps was not only menaced by a continual threat of disbandment but it was rapidly evaporating through demobilisation. Most of the original members of the Corps were mechanics and engineers who had enlisted for the duration of the war. Few of these had any intention of becoming professional soldiers and as soon as the fighting was over they expected to return to their factories and workshops; indeed, as they were skilled men, whose services were now urgently required in industry, they were among the first to be demobilised. What this meant to the Corps can be judged from the fact that within three years the number of personnel stationed at the Tank Corps Centre, which in November 1918 included the camps at Wareham, Swanage and Lulworth in addition to Bovington itself, fell from sixteen thousand<sup>2</sup> to two thousand, two hundred and thirty-two.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of this rapid demobilisation, however, the Tank Corps continued to be used in a variety of operational roles. Abroad, a Tank Group, consisting of the 4th, 9th, 12th, 13th and 16th Battalions, formed part of the Army of Occupation on the Rhine; on 16th August 1919 a small expeditionary force was despatched from Bovington to aid the White Russians;<sup>4</sup> and from the early 1920's the Corps was used increasingly as armoured police in the various trouble spots in the Middle East, the 3rd and 4th Armoured Car Companies being formed in March 1920 specifically for these duties.

At home, the 17th Armoured Car Battalion was sent in January 1921 to deal with trouble in Ireland and on 21st April of that year six armoured car sections were sent from Bovington to carry out police duties in the strike-stricken towns of Edinburgh, York, Shrewsbury and London.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BH Liddell Hart: "The Tanks" (Cassell) 1959, p202

<sup>2</sup> WO Weekly Tank Notes No 42

<sup>3</sup> Census Returns 1921

<sup>4</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion (1919-22)" (Typescript only) Jan 1923, p11  
(Tank Museum File, 014.75)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p14



The continuing demand for tanks, accompanied by rapid demobilisation, highlighted the need for recruits. A bounty system was instituted on 1st February 1919 which persuaded some of the war-enlisted men to re-enlist as peacetime soldiers, but the recruiting sergeants found their readier customers among the younger generation who, in the words of one of them: “having missed the war, were feeling rather like children prevented by sickness from going to the circus.”<sup>1</sup>

The new recruits were sent to the Tank Corps Depot at Wareham whilst the more experienced men were sent straight to Bovington to fill the many vacancies caused by demobilisation at the Tank School and Workshops. Later, largely as the result of increasing unemployment, recruits were more forthcoming and by November 1921 the Depot, which had moved to Bovington at the beginning of that year, was receiving as many as it could handle.<sup>2</sup>

The continuing employment of tanks also necessitated a reorganisation of the Corps, at least on a provisional basis. Of the newly numbered battalions, the 1st (Depot) Battalion was officially formed at Wareham on 26th July 1919, the 5th at Bovington on 3rd September 1919, and the 2nd, absorbing the remnants of the 20th, at Bovington on 4th October 1919. The 3rd Battalion was reconstituted as a cadre in November 1919 and the 4th, absorbing the remnants of the 19th, was reconstituted at Wareham at the end of February 1920.

The battalions formed at Bovington began as very small units. The diarist of the 5th for instance, recorded that: “Barracks having been taken over on the 3rd, a small nucleus of officers and NCOs assembled at Bovington on the afternoon of the 5th September, feeling rather like new boys ... Since this, three drafts have joined, and we now boast of one and half companies, very young to anyone accustomed to war-soldiers or a pre-war foreign service battalion, but keen, smart and likely to make a name for their battalion in the future.”<sup>3</sup>

By December the battalion was at full strength and the men had begun their six months’ individual training. This battalion continued to serve at Bovington until it moved to Wareham at the beginning of 1921 and then to its permanent station at Perham Down in April 1922.

<sup>1</sup> A Dixon: “Tinned Soldiers” (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p61

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol III, No31 (Nov 1921), p149

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I, No7 (Nov 1919), p192

The 2nd Battalion began with four officers and one hundred and thirty-six men who, for the first few months, had quite an easy time. Having given a farewell dance in December to the members of the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps which was being disbanded at the end of the year,<sup>1</sup> they reported in January that: "For the last month or so nothing very serious has been done in the way of training, the chief object being to keep officers and men physically fit and get them to know each other. As this has consisted chiefly of games it has not been at all an unpleasant time."<sup>2</sup>

Within a month, however, they were busily training; "A" Company on a gunnery course at Lulworth, "B" Company on a tank course at Bovington. They continued to train at Bovington until March 1921 when they moved to their permanent station at Farnborough. Nevertheless, great emphasis continued to be placed on sport. Bovington at this time possessed one of only five Basset hound packs in the country,<sup>3</sup> and the Corps Eight practised on the Frome at Wareham before taking part in the Henley Regatta.<sup>4</sup> But team games, especially soccer, were considered to be the most important because these not only helped to foster esprit de corps within battalions but they helped to raise the prestige of the Corps, through its sporting successes, in the army as a whole and thus strengthen its claims to continuity.

In Germany, for instance, the Tank Group established its supremacy on the athletic track over all competitors in the Army of Occupation and as a result represented the British Army in a match against the American Army of Occupation, winning all events except two. At home, it has been judged that "the excellent training that received at Wool, produced units which could hold their own at work or games with the best units in the army."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one recruit, a non-sportsman, found on being posted to the camp in early 1920 that "Sport was the only passion of Bovington's military population and camp was, to say the least, little better than a manufactory of athletes."<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the "Battalion Notes" which were then published monthly in the Tank Corps Journal contained very little information other than sports news.

The unit which considered itself supreme in sports throughout the Corps was the Central Schools. But then this unit considered itself supreme in everything – and perhaps it was justified in doing so – because it contained most of the experienced mechanics of the Corps

<sup>1</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I, No8 (December 1919), p224

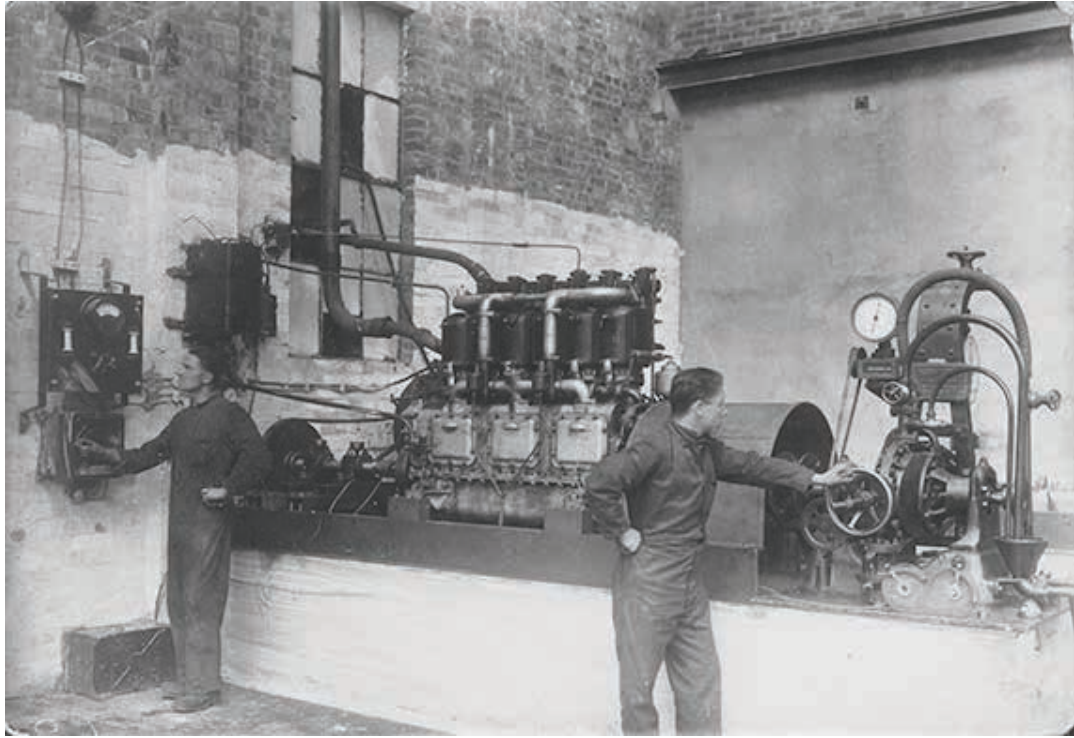
<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I, No9 (January 1920), p262

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I No3 (July 1919), p87

<sup>4</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p193

<sup>5</sup> G Le Q Martel: "In the Wake of the Tank" (Sifton Praed), 1931, p99

<sup>6</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p193



A Ricardo engine on test  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*

and every man in the unit was employed in some sort of staff job. This meant that Schools' personnel worked longer hours than the battalion or depot troops and, in exchange, they were granted certain privileges and allowed a great deal of freedom during off-duty hours. There was, for instance, no roll-call at night and, generally speaking, there was little trouble as long as everyone was in his place and ready for work at the appointed hour in the morning. A visitor to the camp in December 1919 found that Bovington was "the life centre of the Corps where mechanics ruled the roost and where the voice of the drill sergeant was heard, if at all, only as a plaintive echo ... The atmosphere of the camp was friendly and peaceful and it seemed to me the men who walked its roads were more cheerful and contented than the harassed recruits of Wareham."<sup>1</sup>

The drill sergeants were soon to make their presence felt, however. At the beginning of 1921 the 1st (Depot) Battalion was posted from Wareham to Bovington and with "its drill dervishes and its band ... caused a serious epidemic of militarism in units which, hitherto, had shown little or no interest in parade ground displays."<sup>2</sup>

At this time the Central Schools were only just emerging from the comparative chaos that had accompanied the change from war to peace conditions. The year 1919 had been a very difficult one, the greatest problem being to try to find suitable replacements for the large number of skilled men who had been demobilised. Fortunately, during this year, the Schools had not been used to their full capacity: classes were small, consisting of officers and men who arrived at irregular intervals to be trained to fill vacancies in the battalions and a few non-commissioned officers of promising ability who were trained to fill vacancies on the staff.

An unusual course of instruction was held between January and June 1919 when over one hundred men were taught to drive cars, under the Army Resettlement Scheme, with a view to helping them obtain civilian employment as drivers. A Hupmobile chassis which had been found ownerless in the camp was used as an instructional model in the Mechanical School and an Army Service Corps lorry was used for the practical training.<sup>3</sup> Later, in September 1919, a unique course was held when seventy-five Russians were taught to drive tanks before returning to their homeland to fight unsuccessfully against the Bolsheviks.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p142

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p281

<sup>3</sup> "The History of the Central Schools, 1919-22" (Typescript only) Jan 1923, p3  
(Tank Museum File 104.76)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p4

About this time, too, drivers began to practise driving their tanks up onto a long, low block of concrete which, increased in height, still stands on the heath on the western side of the road approximately midway between the camp and Clouds Hill. They were learning to drive onto a “rectank”. This was a long, flat, open railway truck, with a white line painted along its centre, which had been specially designed to carry tanks. It was shunted against an en-on ramp in the camp marshalling yard so that a tank could be driven onto it.

This was a very critical operation because the tank had to be exactly central on the truck; otherwise, because of its width, it would overlap and cause serious trouble to a tunnel or a bridge. Whenever tanks were being entrained, railway inspectors were present to ensure that they were centrally aligned and sometimes they insisted on a driver making six or seven attempts before they were satisfied.<sup>1</sup> The tank personnel found this exasperating and battalion diaries of the time contain such scathing entries as: “In spite of brassbound obstructionists of the NUR complete with 6-inch steel rulers and a mania for half-inch clearance ... the tanks were entrained at Bovington.”<sup>2</sup>

By the beginning of 1920, the standard of instruction at the Central Schools was returning to its high, wartime efficiency. This was aided by the introduction of new machines. All Mark IV tanks were replaced by Mark Vs and, towards the end of 1919, a few of the new medium “C” tanks and the first of the Rolls Royce armoured cars were introduced into the driving programme.”<sup>3</sup>

The Maintenance School was fitted up for dealing with Mark V instruction. All the benches were laid out with various parts of the Ricardo engine and a skeleton tank was used for demonstrating working parts. A visitor to the school in February 1920 found the members of “B” Company, 2nd Battalion, “peering into models and diagrams, in section, profile, back view and sideways, while a patient by perspiring instructor explains for the umpteenth time how stuff called oil persists in poking its nose into every nook and cranny of the Ricardo engine, arriving eventually, thinner and panting, at the same old place from which it started.”<sup>4</sup>

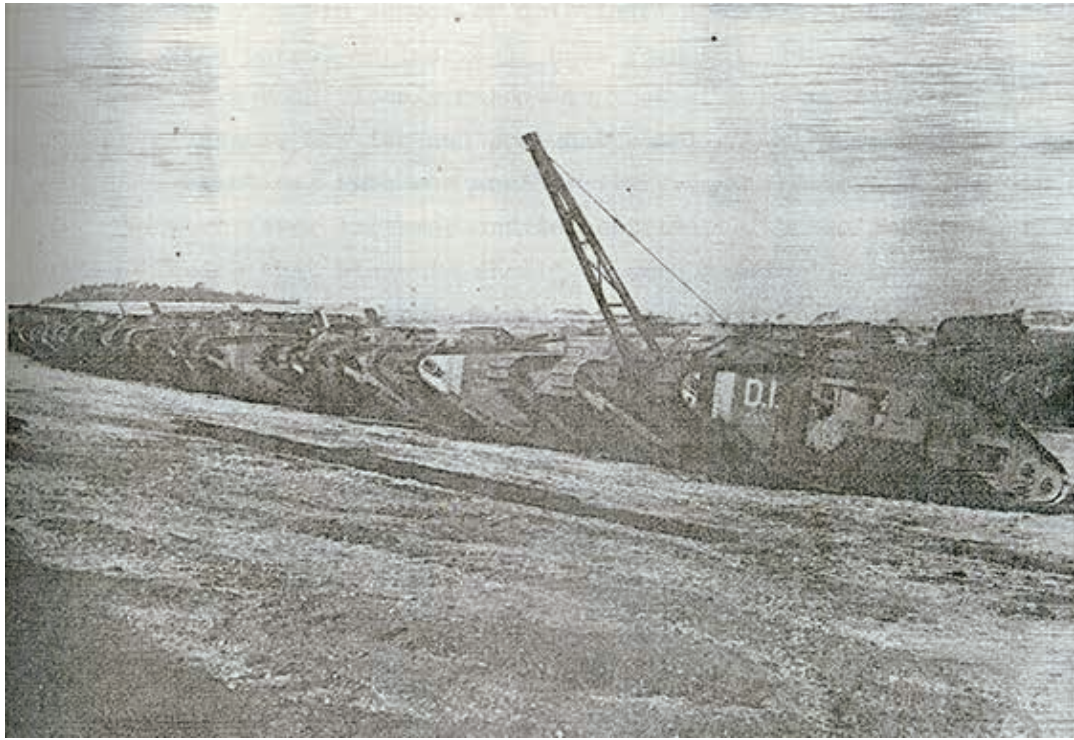
<sup>1</sup> HG Neish: Letter to the editor of “The Tank”, March 1969

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II, No10 (December 1920), p181

<sup>3</sup> “The History of the Central Schools, 1919-22”, p4

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I, No10 (February 1920) p284





The Tank Park (1920)  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*

One soldier who attended a three months' tank training course in the early 1920s recalls that:

“The instructor introduced us to carburettors, magnetos and eccentric oil pumps in a series of dramatic episodes that were described prosaically in the training manual as Carburetion, Ignition and the Lubrication System.

“Our training at the Mechanical School was much the same as that given by a modern school of motoring. Anyone with a slight knowledge of the petrol engine would have found it elementary, for the mechanism of a tank closely resembles that of a motor car, save that it is larger, heavier and somewhat complicated by epicyclic gearing. Practical work was another story. At the Maintenance School there were fewer lectures and demonstrations by the instructors, the order being that students should ‘learn by doing’. And the ‘doing’ of simple maintenance operations on a heavy tank is a formidable task for one unaccustomed to handling drifts, crowbars and fourteen pound sledge hammers.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout 1920 and 1921, instruction was concentrated almost entirely on the elementary training of the personnel of the newly formed tank battalions and the armoured car companies which were being formed for service in Palestine, Mesopotamia and India. Training recruits to drive and maintain tanks or armoured cars, however, were not the work for which the Central Schools had been established. Such work should have been within the scope of qualified company and battalion instructors. Ideally, the work of Central Schools should have been restricted to training selected men to become these instructors. It was decided at the beginning of 1922, therefore, that in future the Schools should try to confine themselves to their proper work. As a prelude to this, an Instructors' Refresher Course was held in February 1922 with a view to bringing up-to-date the knowledge of the instructors and standardising their methods of instruction.<sup>2</sup> This course, in fact, became the first of a series of annual refresher courses. Elementary training, however, especially of young officers on probation, continued to be given.

During the period 1921-22 most of the various wartime schools faded away as a result of financial stringency. Revolver courses were still held but these were merely one-day manual events. The only surviving schools were the Gunnery School at Lulworth and the Driving and Maintenance School at Bovington. At the latter, the numbers trained during this time are summarised in “The History of the Central Schools, 1919-22” as follows:

<sup>1</sup> A Dixon: “Tinned Solders” (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p274

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol III No34 (February 1922), p270

May 1919 to August 1920	-	296
September 1920 to December 1920	-	262
January 1921 to December 1921	-	391 + 768 in Armoured Car classes
January 1922 to December 1922	-	341 + 458 in Armoured Car classes

Central Schools was one of the two wartime units which continued to exist at Bovington after the war. The other was Central Workshops which in December 1920 was reorganised as The Tank Workshop Training Battalion with a strength of twenty-four officers and two hundred and ninety-one other ranks.

In the immediate post-war months this was the unit on which all the work at the Training Centre devolved. During 1919, in spite of losing eight hundred men on demobilisation, its workload actually increased.<sup>1</sup> In the early part of the year its members had to take on charge scores of newly built tanks which were received at Wool Station and then driven to the Tank Repair Park.<sup>2</sup> In the spring they had to prepare tanks in readiness of trouble during the railway strike.<sup>3</sup> In mid-summer they received hundreds of derelict tanks from France.

These arrived at the Bovington siding, which had been opened in July,<sup>4</sup> whence they were towed off the train and away to the Tank Repair Park. During their travels from the battlefields these tanks had been thoroughly rifled, everything moveable having been taken for souvenirs. Once in the repair park they were examined by a Board of Workshop Officers who decided whether they were worth repairing or not. Some were overhauled and issued to the 2nd and 5th Tank Battalions which were formed at Bovington later that year; some were sent to various towns throughout Great Britain where they were displayed as war trophies and some were retained as the nucleus of the first tank museum, which was situated on the heath in a railed-off enclosure near the Central Schools and which contained every type of tank from the original experimental tank, "Little Willie", to the latest infantry carrier.<sup>5</sup>

The remainder of the derelict tanks were advertised for sale<sup>6</sup> and were eventually sold to the Slough Trading Company as scrap.<sup>7</sup> These derelict tanks had flooded Workshops with work and it was not until the end of 1919 that they were able to concentrate on their main task which was "to carry out the repair and maintenance of tanks used for instructional purposes and also to keep men in suitable training for drafts overseas."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22", pp 11-12

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p8

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p9

<sup>4</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22", p10

<sup>5</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I No7 (November 1919), p200

<sup>6</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle", 12th June 1919, p6

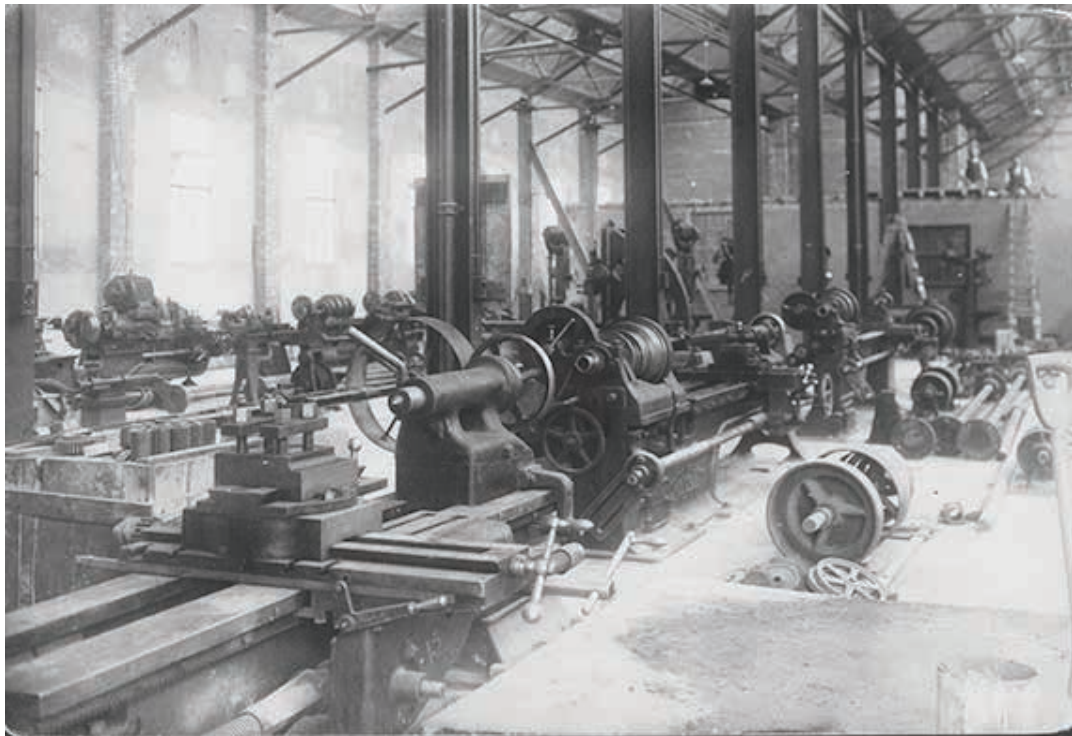
<sup>7</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22", p10

<sup>8</sup> "The History of the Tank Corps Technical Office and Workshops" (1919), p4

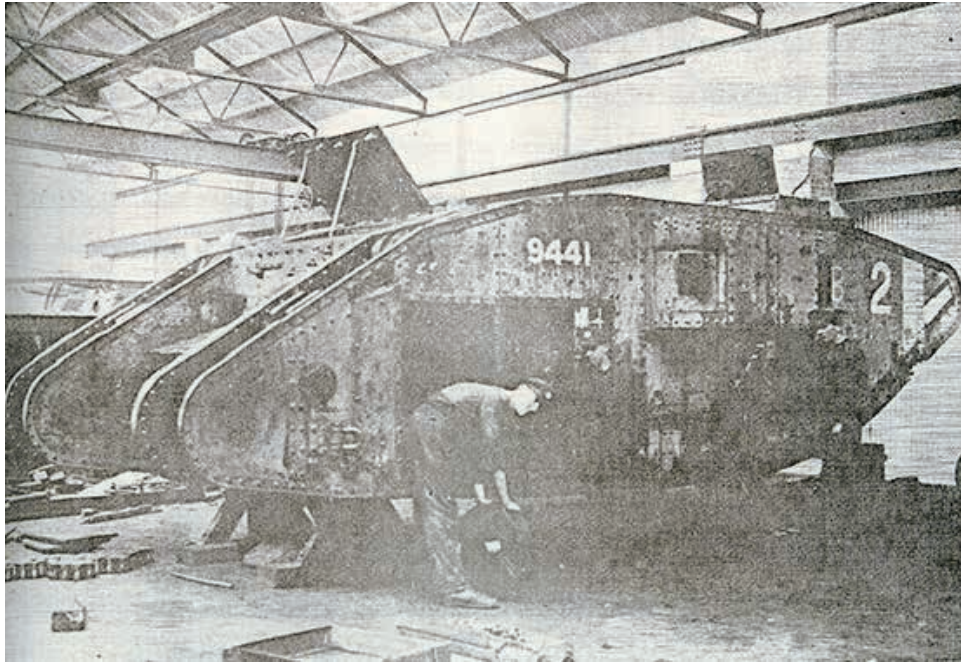




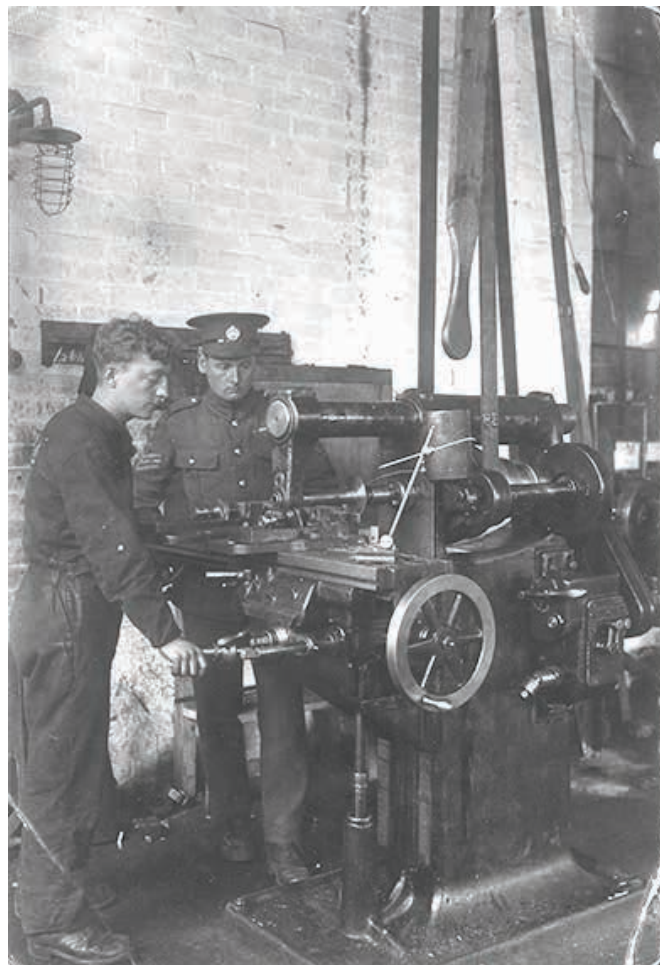
The engine shop  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*



The machine shop  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*



The repair bay  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*



A boy soldier being instructed on the milling machine (1920)  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*



During 1929 there had been on recruiting for Central Workshops. Vacancies had been made up by drafting in skilled men from other units. It was found impossible, however, to produce a sufficient number of properly qualified mechanics by such means and so it was decided to train suitable boy-soldiers for the purpose.<sup>1</sup> The boys were to be under fifteen on enlistment and it was hoped that they would be of a sufficiently high academic standard to be able to pass their Army Certificate of Education (2nd Class) during their first year of service and then concentrate on their technical training. The first batch of boys, forty in number, arrived at Bovington from the depot at Wareham on 31st January 1920 and a further one hundred and fifty arrived during 1921.

At first they were attached to squads of adult soldiers, working on tanks as learners. During 1921, however, the number of boys began to exceed the number of trained men and a new scheme of training became necessary. In June 1921 a special fitters' training shop was opened where boys learned to chip and file before learning to work in other shops. A considerable proportion of the boys' time was also devoted to elementary theoretical work, physical training, drill and organised games so that by the time they reached eighteen years of age they had had a fair grounding as Tank Corps soldiers. In June 1922, all boys were transferred to one company, "A" Company, where they were divided into six squads for all aspects of their training. This boys' training scheme came to an end in 1924 with the opening of new Army Apprentices' Schools. In November of that year, the last boys' contingent at Bovington, accompanied by the band of the Royal Tank Corps, marched to Wool and entrained for Gosport.

The primary tasks of Central Workshops during the early 1920s were to ensure that there was always a considerable number of machines in first-class order at Bovington, ready and available for any emergency, and to overhaul the tanks and armoured cars of other units. They were also responsible for any experimental work carried on at Bovington; in 1920, for instance, they tested the De Thorem searchlight tank and they carried out trials with the Peerless armoured car in the sands at Studland.<sup>2</sup> They were also required to erect and maintain the machinery which was to be used in the new technical buildings.

These were the buildings which had been sanctioned by the War Office in mid-1918 to meet the proposed expansion of the Tank Corps in 1919. The programme was scheduled to be completed by the spring of 1919 and it was in fact half finished by the date of the Armistice. After that, however, progress slowed considerably. The reason for this was that the work was being carried out by prisoners of war, supervised by Royal Engineers, and with the

<sup>1</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22" pp 11-18

<sup>2</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22", p12

gradual repatriation of the prisoners the size of the labour force steadily diminished; in fact, the new buildings were not completed until the end of 1920.<sup>1</sup>

The new buildings included a machine shop, measuring one hundred and fifty by sixty feet, with a capacity for rebushing and turning out twenty-four engines a week; repair bays fitted with two five-ton overhead travelling cranes and capable of accommodating twelve tanks of the largest type; repair sheds, made of galvanised iron and steel, which covered an area one hundred and eighty by one hundred and twenty feet, which contained a machine shop, an electrician's shop, a copper-smith's shop, a wheeler's shop, a smithy and a foundry. These buildings were erected on the site of the original tank hangars and the old portable mechanical school, the latter being moved to the western end of the new workshop parks.<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of the repair shed, all the new buildings were of brick, with steel framed roof trusses, iron window frames, sliding doors and concrete and wood-block floors. In its technical buildings, therefore, Bovington began to take on a look of permanence as early as 1920. Its domestic accommodation, however, was another matter. Until a decision was reached on the future of the Tank Corps itself there was little likelihood of any permanent living quarters being built. On the other hand, by the end of the war, the simple huts which had been erected in the winter of 1914-15 were suffering from the severe wear and tear caused by successive drafts of wartime soldiers. If the camp was to remain open for any length of time after the war then money would have to be spent on it; indeed, in 1920 the War Office granted £30,000 for the redecoration and renovation of the domestic buildings for the camp.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of this, during the next few years the troops were continually changing their huts to enable the works to be carried out. The decorators began at the western end of the camp because the "lines" in that area had been ear-marked to become temporary married quarters, the huts being divided internally by breeze blocks to provide the normal family living accommodation. Families were already occupying "A" lines by the time that the Central Schools personnel vacated "B" lines in September 1920.<sup>4</sup> These troops moved first to "E" lines, "near the centre of the camp, handy for the cinema, the post office and the several teashops of Bovington's Tintown."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No66 (October 1924), p163

<sup>2</sup> "The Record of the Tank Workshop Training Battalion, 1919-22", p13

<sup>3</sup> Referred to in a letter from the Colonel Commandant to Headquarters Southern Command, d 13th Dec 1921 (Tank Museum File 248.20)

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No 18 (October 1920), p134

<sup>5</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p226



A Peerless armoured car chassis  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*



A Jumbo Tractor which was made in the workshops  
*By permission of the Tank Museum*

The huts into which they moved had been occupied previously by members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and one of the men who made the move noted that they "were surrounded by a high fence of barbed wire, and the only entrance to this seraglio was by way of a large wooden gate, medieval in strength and design, the top of which was decorated with more barbed wire and a row of villainous looking spikes."<sup>1</sup> These huts were unusual in that they were divided by wood and canvas partitions into cubicles, holding from three to five men each.<sup>2</sup> The Schools' personnel remained in these luxurious surroundings for only a few months and then they were on the move again, this time to share lines with the Workshop Battalion. Meanwhile, in February 1921, the 2nd Battalion moved eastwards to make way for more quarters.<sup>3</sup>

Not only were the interiors of the huts being redecorated but the surrounds of the camp, too, were being tidied up. A number of old sheds which had been erected during the war were dismantled and numerous rubbish heaps were removed. But attempts to rid the place of the perpetual menace of mud were unsuccessful. The camp was still not properly drained and even the sportsmen had to be content with grounds which were not "in their natural and undrained state, fit for games in anything but the finest weather."<sup>4</sup>

Many attempts were made at this time to develop gardens around the barrack blocks and married quarters. A monthly gardening column in the Corps magazine advised would-be gardeners of the appropriate steps to take and occasionally these bore fruit. Battalion diarists described how "green trees and shrubs are shooting up to dot and deck the pathways."<sup>5</sup> Generally, however, the poor soil of the heathland defeated these attempts at horticulture and even at the end of the 1920s the authorities were still urging "those who have a penchant for gardening to improve Bovington Camp and turn this dismal waste into a garden city."<sup>6</sup>

The provision of married quarters was a great blessing for those who were fortunate enough to be allocated to them, because accommodation in civilian lodgings was hard to come by and could be very expensive to obtain. In June 1920 an officer's wife wrote to the editor of the Tank Corps Journal<sup>7</sup> describing the difficulties of home-hunting.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid*, p226

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No.18 (October 1920), p134

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No.23 (March 1921), p242

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No.74 (June 1925), p33

<sup>5</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol IV No.40 (August 1922), p108

<sup>6</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VIII No.85 (May 1926), p20

<sup>7</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No.14 (June 1920), p34

She explained how she had met a corporal's wife who was having to leave her husband to return home to Ireland because they could no longer afford to pay two guineas a week for the two rooms they were renting in Wareham. She also described her meeting with another woman, the wife of a local confectioner, who owned six cheaply furnished houses in the district and who felt that she had "done her bit" during the war by buying these houses and letting them to officers. Having heard about the rents she charged, the officer's wife did not offer her congratulations. Certainly, until the provision of quarters, most married men "had no choice but to seek shelter in one of the neighbouring villages, paying exorbitant rents for two or three half furnished rooms."<sup>1</sup> But not everyone was as unfortunate as this: a number of sergeants were able to rent comfortable rooms at a reasonable rent in the village of Stoborough.<sup>2</sup> Their main problem was the eight miles cycle journey to and from work each day. Cycling was, indeed, the most common form of transport and, following the move of the 1st (Depot) Battalion to Bovington, in February 1921, Wareham became the scene of "a very large cycle parade each morning to get to Bovington by reveille."<sup>3</sup>

The advent of married quarters was a boon to the local traders. During the war a number of these had erected on the southern verge of the camp a variety of wooden huts, tin shacks, old railway carriages and seaside kiosks. From these makeshift buildings they catered for the needs of the troops as newsagents, boot repairers, barbers, fish and chip fryers and café proprietors. Among the first of the civilian traders were George Keen and Herbert Smith. The former used to visit the camp on Sunday afternoons from his tobacco and sweet shop in Poole High Street to sell his wares from a suitcase, whilst the latter began his family business by cycling around the camp selling the "Daily Express" and earning fifty shillings a week from the newspaper's proprietors. Later, they opened adjacent, small stores in timber huts on the corner of what is now Swinton Avenue.

Herbert Smith rapidly expanded his business, opening another shop for the sale of fancy goods on a site adjacent to the family's present emporium, and then, in 1921, erecting the existing large, galvanised iron store which in those days was used as a café and billiard saloon.<sup>4</sup> The Smiths leased their sites directly from the Moreton Estate but other traders, whose shops were to the south of the Smiths, rented theirs from a Major Walters who was himself a leasee of the Moreton Estate.

<sup>1</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p260

<sup>2</sup> Captain VA Nobes RTR (in conversation)

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No.22 (February 1921), p218

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Mr F Smith, present proprietor



He had a ninety-nine years' lease on an area of land situated on the eastern side of the road running from Bovington to Wool at an annual rent of one hundred pounds.<sup>1</sup> On this land, shopkeepers erected a variety of shacks and huts which came to form the nucleus of "Tintown", by which name Bovington village has come to be known, both colloquially and officially.

By 1920, the Bovington traders included not only George Keen and Herbert Smith but also a shopkeeper named Thomas Coldwell, a barber named Charlie Payne, a firm of bootmakers, Alfred Jones and Sons, and two garage proprietors;<sup>2</sup> George and Bert Eberson ran a taxi-service and hired out bicycles, whilst the Red Garage, owned by Rowe, Reiffer and Hellier, offered open and closed cars for hire and catered for dance parties.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there was a cinema which was owned by Bugg, Scott & Company.<sup>4</sup>

The troops, in fact, had a choice of two cinemas; Bugg's "Bovington Cinema" in "Tintown", and the "Garrison Cinema" on the camp itself. Other entertainment was provided by occasional visits from concert parties; once a year a professional company from London, "The Jesters", visited the camp during its annual summer season at the Pavilion, Swanage, whilst a number of amateur productions was put on by local companies with such appropriate names as "The Magnetos", and "Nuts and Bolts". For more sophisticated entertainments the troops had to travel to Bournemouth. Every evening there was a rush to catch the 5.18 from Wool<sup>5</sup> and, later, an even greater rush to hire a taxi as the last train from Bournemouth pulled into Wool Station. One soldier vividly remembers hearing: "No, sir, I will not take more than sixteen up to the camp in this car."<sup>6</sup>

For the stay-at-home there were the usual servicemen's clubs and canteens. These were provided by the NAAFI, the YMCA with its "clink-clonk of cannoning billiard ball, strains of music, laughing of parried jokes and the gentle wafting of savoury smells from our ever busy kitchen,"<sup>7</sup> and the Church of England Institute which, with a seating capacity of nine hundred, was the camp's social centre and the venue of concerts and dances. For those who wished to study, there was an education centre which had recently been opened close to the institute. As we shall see in the next chapter, education was about to play a prominent part in the development of Bovington Camp.

<sup>1</sup> Land Office File, LAW/GEN/57/I, E100 (Letter from War Office, DLA 883 d 13th March 1951)

<sup>2</sup> Kelly's Directory 1920

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No 15 (July 1920), p77

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No 14 (June 1920) p33

<sup>5</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol I No 9 (January 1920), p250

<sup>6</sup> "The Differential" quoted in Tank Corps Journal Vol VIII No 94 (Feb 1927), p352

<sup>7</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol II No 20 (December 1920), p183

## V - 1923-1925

The year 1923 was of particular significance to the Tank Corps. On 1st September, a War Office committee which had been sitting since February finally decided on the constitution of the new corps and two months later a Royal Warrant, dated 7th November 1923, declared that:

“Whereas we have noted with great satisfaction the splendid work that has been performed by our Tank Corps during the Great War, our will and pleasure is that this Corps shall enjoy the distinction of ‘Royal’ and shall henceforth be known as our ‘Royal Tank Corps’”.

Being brought into line with the other regiments and corps of the army brought considerable satisfaction to the officers and men at Bovington but there was another event which was of even more immediate interest to the married families living there. This was the opening of a new council school.

The number of children living in married quarters had been growing steadily – the county newspaper had put the figure as high as five hundred at the end of 1921<sup>1</sup> - and the provision of education for those of school age was causing concern both to the military and the educational authorities. The Dorset County Council was already spending £256 pa transporting many of them to schools in neighbouring villages,<sup>2</sup> some even to Poole, yet some children were receiving no education at all. There was general agreement that there should be a school on the camp but disagreement on who was going to pay for it.

The army expected the County Council to build a new school but the Chairman of the County Council’s Finance Committee retorted that it was most unjust if the Government were going to bring in an unknown number of children to Bovington and then compel the Council to build new schools<sup>3</sup> - especially as the War Office had not consulted the County Council about schools before embarking on their large married quarters programme.

By the end of 1922 the situation had become too urgent to await the building of a new school and the army agreed to convert an existing military building for the purpose, charging the County Council £168 towards the cost of the alterations. It was a large corrugated-iron building, with wooden floors and internal wooden partitions, which had been used previously as one of the troops’ canteens. It was situated halfway along the present Swinton Avenue, almost opposite the Church of England Institute, and it backed onto one of the former infantry parade grounds, Messines Square, so there was plenty of room for a playground.

<sup>1</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, 24th November 1921, p4

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p2

<sup>3</sup> The Minutes of the Dorset County Council Quarterly Meeting held on 16th November 1921

The purpose of the school was to “serve the Camp of the Tank Corps Centre and that area in nearer proximity than any existing school.”<sup>1</sup> When it was opened on 8th January 1923 it had an attendance of eighty-eight children of all ages and a staff of four which consisted of the headmaster, Mr EG Walkling, one certificated assistant mistress, one uncertificated assistant mistress and one uncertificated assistant master. The school correspondent was Rev JAL Anderson, the Vicar of Wool, and the other five managers were three military officers, Colonels Stone, Mudie and Bolton, and two civilians, Mr J Spicer and Mr WH White, who were elected at an extraordinary meeting of the Wool Parish Council, held specifically for this purpose on 7th February 1923.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset the school was considered very much part of the camp. the school was closed whenever an important army event, such as the annual sports meeting, was taking place so that the children could attend with their parents. On the other hand, the senior officers as well as the parents were invited to all school functions. The first of these was “a patriotic demonstration and exhibition of drill,”<sup>3</sup> which was held on 17th May 1923 to celebrate Empire Day which itself fell during the Whitsun holiday that year. This was attended by the Colonel Commandant, Sir Hugh Elles, and most of his staff, the Mayor Wareham, and a large number of lady visitors and parents. Later in the year the school play, “Abou Hassan”, was so well received that an additional performance had to be organised. Henceforth, the Empire Day celebrations and a school play or pantomime became annual features of the school’s programme and both continued to be well supported by both the parents and Bovington’s military population.

The military authorities, however, did more than just attend school functions. They charged the County Council a less than economic rent – only £20 during the first year<sup>4</sup> - carried out all minor repairs to the buildings and furniture, re-gravelled the playground, supplied coal and coke in winter when the normal deliveries were late, provided transport for school outings, allocated a piece of ground thirty yards by forty yards for the school garden and provided the headmaster with the Warrant Officer-type married quarter nearest the school as the school-house at a rent of £26 pa.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The School Log Book (now kept in the office of the Headquarter at Bovington Primary School)

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of Wool Parish Council Meetings

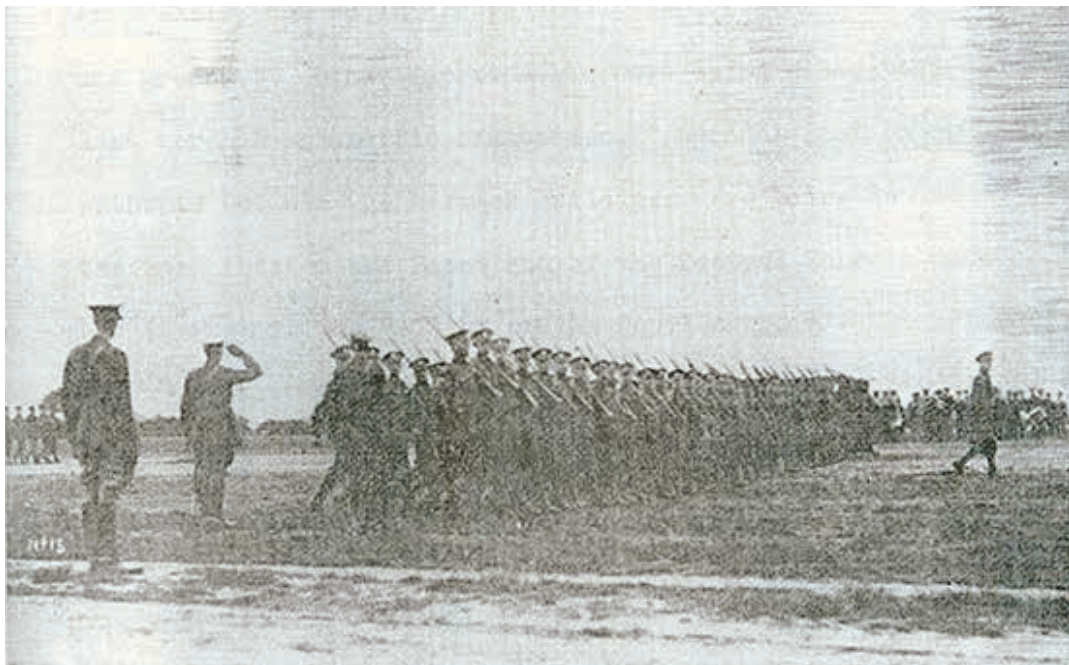
<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal, Vol I No 50 (June 1923), p40

<sup>4</sup> “Dorset County Chronicle”, 1st February 1923, p3

<sup>5</sup> School Log Book, w/e 14th December 1923



Tank Corps Athletic Sports (1921)



Personnel of the 1st (Depot) Battalion march past  
Colonel Commandant E.B. Hankey, D.S.O., at the King's Birthday Parade (1923)  
*Loaned by Sgt Barrett (RTR)*



What was happening, in fact, was that many of the long-needed improvements to the camp were at last being sanctioned now that the future of the Corps and, incidentally, of Bovington itself was assured. Since 22nd August 1921, with the original post-war grant of £30,000 for redecoration and renovation only one-third spent, the Colonel Commandant had been pressing for “a general reconstruction of the Camp as regards the Barracks for Rank and File.”<sup>1</sup> He had pointed out that since the original programme was adopted, variations in establishments and the increasing decrepitude of existing buildings had altered the priorities of, and made necessary additions to, the original programme.

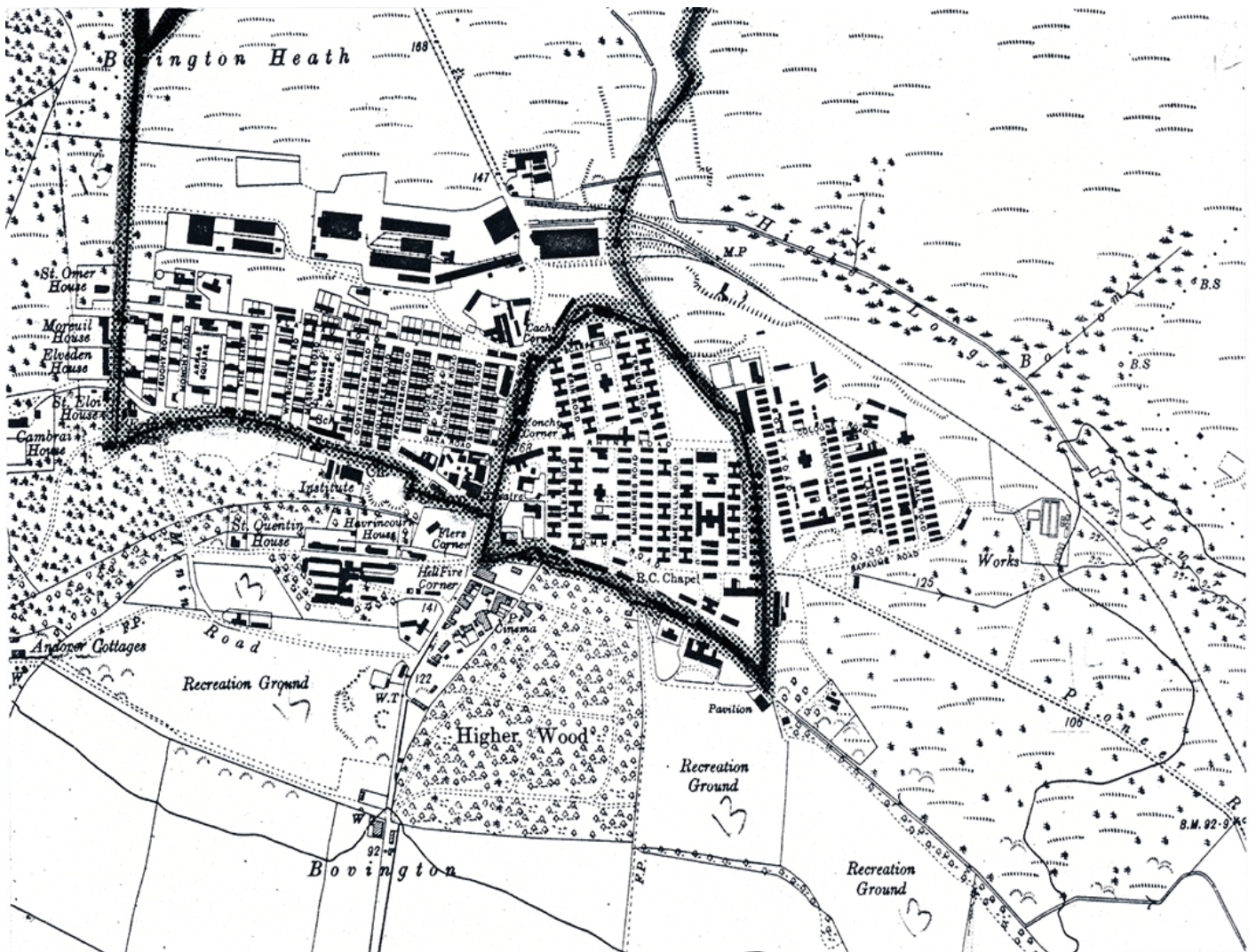
That the Government appreciated the need for additional buildings, at least with regard to married quarters, was shown in the Army Estimates for 1923/24, which revealed incidentally that the numbers of personnel stationed in the various units at Bovington were eight hundred and thirty three in the 1st (Depot) Battalion, seven hundred and thirty-seven in the Tank Workshop Training Battalion and two hundred and seventy-five in the Central Schools. Under the section: “Military Land and Works Services” appeared the following:

“Moreover, the redistribution of troops after the war and the creation of new units, such as those of the Tank Corps, have necessitated the use of huttet camps, erected during the war and designed only for occupation by single men. A very considerable sum will be devoted in 1923 to 1924 to the construction of quarters for married officers and other ranks in these camps, which is one of the most urgent military necessities. The provision of these quarters will have the further advantage of releasing accommodation for the civilian population in the vicinity of the camps. For similar reasons married quarters are also being provided for the staffs of ... various instructional and experimental establishments at Bovington ...”

To provide new quarters at Bovington would require the acquisition of land beyond the original boundaries of the camp and this gave the War Office Land Department an opportunity to tidy up the existing arrangements. Although no new purchases of land had been made since 1910, the area of the camp had been increased considerably by wartime requisitioning. At the end of the war those requisitioned areas which were no longer required for military purposes were handed back to their owners but those areas which had been built upon or which were still being used for training purposes were retained under the powers of the Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Acts of 1916 and 1920. The largest of these was an area belonging to the Moreton Estate which ran down the western side and along the southern edge of the camp, virtually surrounding the area known as “Tintown” and containing a large military hospital and all the sports fields of the camp.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Headquarters Southern Command, d 13th Dec 1921 (Tank Museum File, 248.20)





Post War map illustrating how camp has spread south and east  
beyond original boundaries

The second, belonging to the Weld Estate, covered two distinct areas; firstly, there was a large area on the eastern side of the camp, part of which provided the site for an extension of the original barrack accommodation and part of which was being used as an extension to the original training area and included the northern section of the Bovington-Wool railway line; secondly, there was a small strip of land extending to the south-east which contained the most southerly section of the railway line. The third area was another strip of land used for the railway; this joined the two strips belonging to the Weld Estate and was owned by the Drax Estate.

The War Office had little difficulty in purchasing the largest and the smallest of these areas. On 28th March 1924 four thousand, three hundred and eighteen pounds was paid to the Framptons for their land, the only condition of the sale being that the army should erect and maintain along the western boundary of the camp a fence which “in his or their opinion may best be calculated to resist human efforts to climb over, under or through the same.” The conveyance is interesting, though, in that it shows that the army was already using the land. It begins: “And whereas some time since, the Secretary of State in exercise of his Statutory or other powers entered into possession of the said hereditaments hereby assured and he still continues in such possession ...”<sup>1</sup>

On 31st March the Drax Estate agreed to sell that area of land between the river Frome and the River Lytchett, over which the railway ran, to the Secretary of State “in exercise of the powers of the Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Acts of 1916 and 1920<sup>2</sup> ... for the sum of £1,151.10 shillings.”<sup>3</sup> By the terms of the conveyance the War Office had to agree to maintain and keep in good repair the existing concrete and wire fences on both sides of the railway and to provide a number of culverts and gateways, the most important of which were the level-crossing gates at the junction of the railway and main Wool-Wareham road just to the north of Woolbridge Manor.

The purchase of the land from the Weld Estate was complicated by the fact that the War Office also wished to purchase another part of the Estate, the coastal area between Lulworth Cove and Arish Mell, as a gunnery range and this provoked a storm of local protest. On 22nd January 1923, the Commanding Officer of the Royal Engineers at Weymouth wrote to the

<sup>1</sup> WO Land Office (Dorchester) Conveyance 24

<sup>2</sup> Under Section 3 of these Acts, the War Office was empowered to purchase any land which it was occupying so long as such power was used by 31st August 1924

<sup>3</sup> WO Land Office (Dorchester) Conveyance 23

Clerk to the Lieutenancy of Dorset requesting him to obtain the signatures of two Deputy Lieutenants of the County to the certificates which he was enclosing “relating to the land in the Parish of Wool and the Parishes of Bere Regis and Stoke respectively, duly executed in accordance with Section 23 of the Defence Act of 1842. The land in question is required by the War Department for a Tank Training Centre.”<sup>1</sup> The Deputy Lieutenants, however, refused to sign the certificates without first viewing the land and the Commanding Officer had to point out that “It is laid down by the Law Officers of the Crown that ‘the Lieutenant, it is conceived, will adopt without hesitation or reserve the judgement of the Military Officer Commanding the district as sufficient and satisfactory on these points – that is, the necessity and expediency of taking possession of the lands’ ... In this instance it is the Army Council itself which has decided as to the necessity for acquisition of land.”<sup>2</sup>

The Deputy Lieutenants were still reluctant to sign, however, and referred the matter to Lord Shaftesbury, the Lieutenant of the County. He studied the relevant clauses of the Act and the, on 10th February 1923, authorised the certificate relating to Bovington. The business took a further year to complete but finally on 31st March 1924 the War Office paid £2,500 to the Weld Estate for “442 acres 3 rods and 1 perch situate in or contiguous to the Parish of Wool”,<sup>3</sup> thereby bringing the total area of the camp to two thousand one hundred and thirty-three acres.<sup>4</sup>

No attempt was made at this time to buy the “Tintown” area. Later, after the Second World War, when the War Office tried to buy it in order to include it in the general modernisation of the camp, the owners of the properties refused to sell except under a compulsory purchase order and this could not be obtained because the military authorities could produce no evidence of a “bona fide military commitment”.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, changes had taken place among the senior appointments at Bovington. During the autumn of 1923 Colonel TC Mudie relinquished command of the 1st (Depot) Battalion to become Colonel Commandant of the Tank Corps Centre and Lieutenant Colonel GM Lindsay became the Chief Instructor at the Central Schools. The latter decided to increase the emphasis on the tactical side of the instruction and to increase the amount of experimental work which the Central Schools could undertake now that the Central Workshops was changing its role to that of a specialised base workshop.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter, CREW 2481 d 22 Jan 1923 (Dorset County Archives, Misc shelf W.13, No 15 (p))

<sup>2</sup> Letter, CREW 2481 d 30th Jan 1923 (Dorset County Archives, Misc shelf W.13, No.15 (p))

<sup>3</sup> WO Land Office (Dorchester) Conveyance 22

<sup>4</sup> Mr CHH Kentish, WO Land Agent (Dorchester)

<sup>5</sup> WO Land Office File, LAW/GEN/57 Pt1, E13 (Memo from HQ Southern Command), d 17 April 1951)

<sup>6</sup> See page 54

Under his direction the personnel of the Schools set out to design a new tank, to solve the problem of internal tank control and to work out a scheme for basic tank-aircraft cooperation. Lindsay wrote from Bovington:

“Control of tanks is a thing that we are working on hard here now, but as yet we have not arrived at a solution, although we feel we are progressing. We are doing a good deal of experiment in cooperation with aircraft. Remember that the thing of the future is the Mechanical Force on the ground working with the Mechanical Force in the air ...”<sup>1</sup>

Local RAF officers were keen to work with Lindsay on his scheme but, unfortunately for him, the Air Ministry refused to encourage the development of what was to become the basic feature of the German Blitzkrieg. Lindsay had better luck, however, with his control experiments and an instrument called the Laryngaphone was produced which enabled the tank commander to communicate with the various members of his crew in spite of the noise of the tank. A further result of Lindsay’s work at the Schools was the development of the first really fast heavy tank – the “Independent” – which was the first tank in which the fighting body was designed by the user. Unfortunately, again, however, although this machine incorporated a number of innovations, including the use of bullet-proof glass, financial stringency prevented it from being produced in quantity.

At Central Workshops the new workshops were providing room for the various specialised trades of a self-contained workshop – a draughtsman, pattern makers, moulders, turners, fitters, coppersmiths, riveters, boiler makers and blacksmiths. All men were interviewed on arrival regarding their former trades and as far as possible they were put into that type of work. This tended not only to produce higher standards in the shops but it kept men in touch with their basic civilian trades. The work itself was continually becoming more advanced.

It was no longer concerned mainly with repairing the tanks and armoured cars of the Centre, it was now specialising in complete tank overhauls. It had, in fact, developed into the type of base workshop which, in the army, had long been recognised as the business of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. Indeed, since early 1921, a force of about eighty non-commissioned officers and men of the RAOC had been attached to Central Workshops in order to gain experience of tank work.<sup>2</sup>

These men were to prove to be the thin end of the wedge because at the beginning of 1925 the Workshop Training Battalion was disbanded<sup>3</sup> and the work of Central Workshops became the sole responsibility of the RAOC. Henceforth the unit was to be run along the lines of a civilian workshop and men trained there were later accepted in industry as fully qualified tradesmen.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in BH Liddell Hart: “The Tanks” (Cassell), 1959. p232

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal, Vol VI No 66 (October 1924), p163

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal, Vol VI No 71 (March 1925), p297



Not everyone who was posted to Bovington, of course, was a tradesman. Recruits continued to arrive at the Depot Battalion at a steady rate<sup>1</sup> and one of the points which TE Lawrence noticed about them – when he joined them as Private TE Shaw in March 1923 – was their complete lack of interest in technical matters or, for that matter, in the army itself. Commenting upon this in a letter, soon after his arrival at Bovington, he wrote: “Here every man has joined because he was down and out: and no one talks of the army or of promotion or of trades or of accomplishments.”<sup>2</sup>

He found, nevertheless, that recruits’ training at Bovington compared favourably with that which he had experienced in the Royal Air Force. Referring to Bovington in a letter to a senior RAF officer, he wrote:

“It’s run like Uxbridge but in small squads of twenty each. The training period is eighteen weeks, half as long again as yours. It is less urgent, too: the standard not less, but the approach to it gentle: nor is there the same tightness of control over our walking about, nor as many penalties or threats as in your place. You will be glad to hear that the camp is more lavishly run than yours. Fuel, food, bedding, etc all plentiful. Also baths and libraries. There is one improvement I see. At Uxbridge when I joined I went straight to fatigues ... Here there is practically nothing of that. The duty men, not the recruits, do the fatigues, and the camp is so arranged, with civilian contracts, that the balance of military work is very light.”<sup>3</sup>

One aspect of the recruits’ training which did not impress Lawrence, however, was the education. “The education section,” he wrote “is crudely run by NCOs who at Uxbridge would be taught themselves.” Yet Bovington was very proud of its educational organisation. An education centre had been opened close to the Church of England Institute in 1919. This contained a classroom where classes were held in English, mathematics, French, history and geography, and a reading room where students could browse through books which had been recommended to them by the staff.

At first, the emphasis was on resettlement courses for those about to be demobilised but before long attention was turned onto the career soldiers and in 1920 Army Certificates of Education, later pre-requisites for promotion were reintroduced. By June 1921 classes were in full swing and educational staff were congratulating themselves that “the cultivation of the mind has commenced.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tanks Corps Journal, Vol V No 57 (January 1924), p225

<sup>2</sup> (Ed) D Garrett: “Selected Letters of TE Lawrence” (Jonathan Cape) 1938, P178

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, pp 171-2

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol III No 26 (June 1921), p23



The Depot Battalion was particularly concerned with the education of its recruits and each month its Battalion Orders contained a long list of men who had been successful in obtaining their Third Class Certificates.<sup>1</sup> Classes were not confined to recruits, though: the senior non-commissioned officers on the staff were expected to study for their First Class Certificates and the number doing so increased considerably after a War Office announcement in the summer of 1923 that in future soldiers who were not in possession of the requisite certificate of education would not be eligible to have their acting rank made substantive when substantive promotion was reintroduced.

Whilst to the majority of soldiers education as synonymous with studying for their certificates, the educational staff believed that their work should be judged not so much on the number of certificates gained as on “the improvement in rank and file both as soldiers and citizens.”<sup>2</sup> In this way they may have succeeded; certainly they provided the recruits at Bovington with a firm foundation on which to base their military training and the official historian of the Royal Tank Regiment affirms that “the effort put into educational training at the Depot contributed much to the progress attained in the mechanical and tactical training of units.”<sup>3</sup>

One unit at Bovington which was proud of its examination successes was the 1st Armoured Car Company, the members of which made their temporary home at Bovington during the second half of 1924. After completing a Vickers gun course at Lulworth in July, they spent the next six months learning to drive their new Crossley armoured cars around the Dorset countryside. They had to study subjects other than driving, however, and before they left for India at the beginning of 1925 only seven of their one hundred and sixty-one members had failed to obtain their education certificates.<sup>4</sup>

By 1925, the soldiers of the Royal Tank Corps had become the most expensive in the army. The Army Estimates for 1924-25 showed that a battalion of tanks, with a strength of five hundred and twenty-eight, cost £263,000 or nearly £500 per man per annum, whereas a battalion of infantry, consisting of seven hundred and ninety-one all ranks, cost £121,000 or approximately £153 per man.

<sup>1</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No 67 (Nov 1924), p176

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol III No 26 (June 1921), p23

<sup>3</sup> BH Liddell Hart: “The Tanks” (Cassell), 1959, p266

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No 66 (October 1924), p154

Not only were the soldiers of the Royal Tank Corps the costliest in the army but, if we are to accept Liddell Hart's verdict, they were also the proudest. His opinion is obviously at variance with TE Lawrence's, but describing the Corps in the mid-1920s he wrote:

“Morale and esprit de corps were heightened by the well-justified feeling that it was giving a lead to the military world. The exceptionally high standard of its NCOs was regarded with envious admiration by other branches of the Service. The same was true of the recruits who were coming forward to join the Corps.”<sup>1</sup>

As it was at Bovington that the non-commissioned officers received their advanced technical training and the recruits their basic training, it is easy to see how this camp had come, by 1925, to be accepted throughout the military world as the “home” of the Royal Tank Corps.

As such, it was the venue of frequent trials and demonstrations. One of these was held in the middle February 1925, to demonstrate the effectiveness of tracked vehicles vis-à-vis wheeled vehicles over difficult terrain. A correspondent who followed the demonstration described the setting in these words:

“The course chosen was some three and a half miles long over all sorts of country, soft, hard, dry, wet, firm, spongy, flat and hilly, with a measured mile along the hard, high road. It contained every known kind of obstacle that a cross-country vehicle would be likely to meet across country in war – shell-holes full of water, streams, ditches, trenches, steep and easy slopes up and down, boggy marshland, deep heather and good gravel; the only obstacle missing was a hedge – at least, I didn't see one. There was also a zig-zag stretch of thick mud and clay about one hundred and fifty yards long which had to be traversed up and down ...”<sup>2</sup>

South of the exercise area had grown up the nucleus of today's brick and concrete town. A contemporary description of the camp in February 1925<sup>3</sup> describes the many changes that had taken place since the Tank Corps first moved into the area. It confirms what we have already noted, that the whole of the western half of the camp had been converted into

<sup>1</sup> BH Liddell Hart: “The Tanks” (Cassell), 1959, p266

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No 71 (March 1925), p302

<sup>3</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No 70 (February 1925), p276

married quarters whilst the eastern half contained the reconstructed barracks huts of the units stationed at the Tank Corps Centre. It lists the number of married quarters as nine officers' and one hundred and forty-seven other ranks'. It confirms also that the sergeants' messes had been rebuilt during the previous two years and that a new brick building, in the course of construction, was expected to be opened as the central officers' Mess in August 1925; meanwhile, brick quarters were being erected for single officers and eighteen of these were already occupied. The only other brick buildings which existed were the new tank workshops and these looked, inside and out, very much like a large civilian factory.

To the north of the workshops lay an acre of heathland which had been railed off in 1919-20 as the original tank museum. By 1925, this had become seriously neglected; the surrounding fence was broken and, among the remains of twenty-six tanks, blackberries grew in profusion and rabbits abounded. In wet weather it was partly a lake.<sup>1</sup> But the sixteen acres of sports pitches were at last being drained. These were under the control of a Centre Grounds Development Committee which employed four civilian groundsmen to keep them in good order. In addition to the playing fields, the camp boasted ten tennis courts and two squash courts. It was also a popular meeting place for the Dorset hounds.<sup>2</sup>

As for shopping facilities, the NAAFI was the main supplier but tradesmen from the neighbouring towns visited the camp and locally there were "shops of various shapes and designs – stationers, hairdressers, ironmongers, motor engineers and other small stores, not forgetting the numerous cafes provided for the use and entertainment of the single men."<sup>3</sup> This shopping area was rapidly spreading downhill from the camp's main cross-roads and now contained more than twenty buildings,<sup>3</sup> most of them wooden huts. One of these, which contained the only telephone on the camp available for non-official use, served as the post office and another was occupied by Mr Frank Mitchell, the photographer.

No history of Bovington Camp would be complete without mentioning him. During two world wars and the intervening period of peace he remained the self-appointed camp photographer. He took personal photographs, group photographs, and official photographs at every opportunity. Most of the illustrations in the earliest copies of the Tank Corps Journal were his work and by the time he retired, shortly after the end of the Second World War, his little hut looked like a museum with its collection of historic photographs. Unfortunately, when his hut was destroyed, his photographs were destroyed with it. These included one entitled: "The First Parade in the Beret Cap".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VII No 83 (March 1926), p312

<sup>2</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VI No 70 (February 1925), p276

<sup>3</sup> Kelly's Directory, 1926

<sup>4</sup> Tank Corps Journal Vol VII No 73 (May 1925), p3

It was in 1925 that this by-now traditional part of the Royal Tank Corps uniform made its first appearance. For years the War Office had been discussing what would be the most suitable type of headgear to issue to tank personnel. The soldier's normal peaked cap had been found very unsuitable, except turned back to front, as the peak prevented a tank crewman from keeping his eyes close enough to the vision slits or gun sights. It also revealed oil stains too clearly.

In 1922 General Elles had recommended that the Tank Corps should be issued with berets similar to those of the French Chasseurs Alpines, but the higher military authorities considered them too sloppy. Nevertheless, they accepted the idea of a beret-type hat and in November 1923 they submitted a proposal to the King that the members of the Royal Tank Corps should be issued with a black head-dress something akin to a Scottish tam-o'-shanter. This proposal received royal approval in March 1924 but the first berets did not appear at Bovington for another twelve months. The first parade in berets was held in April 1925 and since then berets have been part of the everyday Bovington scene.

Not so the railway! By the middle 1920s the Bovington-Wool railway which had had such a busy beginning in 1919 had almost ceased to function. Many of the men to whom I have spoken who were stationed at Bovington at that time cannot remember a single train running; indeed, one of them referred to it as "the ghost train."<sup>1</sup> This line eventually closed completely on 4th November 1928<sup>2</sup>, although the track was not lifted until 1936<sup>3</sup>

The council school, on the other hand, was continuing to grow in size and stature. The school log book does not mention attendance figures for 1925 but numbers were certainly increased by twenty-five children belonging to the men of the 4th Battalion which was stationed at Bovington from June 1925, when the War Office lease on its lands in Wareham expired, until April 1926 when it moved to its permanent station at Catterick.<sup>4</sup> To accommodate the increasing numbers, permission was given by the County Education Committee for an additional classroom to be erected at the eastern end of the school building for the use of the senior pupils. Additionally, a practical instruction hut complete with stove and sink and ten woodwork benches was brought into use in the playground.

<sup>1</sup> Captain VA Nobes RTR (in conversation)

<sup>2</sup> "Dorset County Chronicle", 8th November 1928, p4

<sup>3</sup> JH Lucking: "Railways of Dorset" (Railway Correspondence & Travel Society) 1968, p45

<sup>4</sup> School Log Book, w/e 12th June 1925 and 5th February 1926



The headmaster was very keen on practical activities: from the school's opening he had organised gardening classes and during 1925 the curriculum was gradually extended to include woodwork, domestic science, map-reading and field sketching; and the staff was increased by one part-time domestic science mistress.<sup>1</sup> In the evenings, voluntary classes in motor-mechanics were held for the senior boys by instructors from the Central Schools. In June 1925 a conference was held in Dorchester at which it was decided to make the school a special "Demonstration School with a Practical Bias."<sup>2</sup> The more academic side of the work was not neglected, however, and the HNIs on their next visit noted that "History and Geography are taught with the main object of rendering the children intelligent and duty loving future citizens."<sup>3</sup>

This aspect of the schoolwork was applauded by the military authorities and the editor of the Tank Corps Journal found it impossible:

"Not to contrast the teaching, the general outlook, and the whole atmosphere in a school such as this, with that by which so many of our children are surrounded in the Socialist Sunday Schools. We felt that we could do with a great many more headmasters and teachers of the type to be found at Bovington. If all schools were run on these lines we do not think there would be much fear for the future of the country."<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone, however, was as concerned as this with the children's upbringing; in fact, many single soldiers regretted the day that married families had appeared on the scene. One of them summarised their feelings generally with these words:

"With the coming of wives and children the camp lost the attractive backwoods atmosphere which had tickled my imagination in the far off days of 1919. Respectability and smugness were now the order of the day. Soon we became accustomed to seeing perambulators, well-fed women and over-dressed children on roads and paths that had once been sacred to the prancings of athletes. So, Bovington ceased to be a community and became a garrison."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School Log Book, w/e 1st May 1925

<sup>2</sup> School Log Book, w/e 19th June 1925

<sup>3</sup> School Log Book w/e 24th December 1926

<sup>4</sup> Vol III, No 98 (June 1926), p31

<sup>5</sup> A Dixon: "Tinned Soldiers" (Jonathan Cape) 1941, p261

A garrison it had certainly become and a garrison it has remained. In 1937 the Central Schools ceased to exist and became the Armoured Fighting Vehicles School with a Gunnery Wing at Lulworth and a Driving and Maintenance Wing at Bovington. At the beginning of the Second World War the camp expanded southwards, the D&M School moving into newly built accommodation on the eastern side of the road behind the modern Tank Museum and a miscellaneous assortment of wartime units occupying the huts on the other side of the road where the Junior Leaders' Regiment's barracks now stand. In 1947 Bovington became the Royal Armoured Corps Centre. At that time the camp, apart from the Second World War extensions, was basically the same as it was in 1925.

It remained the same until the late nineteen-sixties when a remodernisation programme began. Now in 1970, this programme is virtually finished and most of the buildings mentioned in this essay have been recently demolished. Wooden huts and even the first brick-built officers' mess have given way to concrete and glass blocks. Looking at this modern complex, it is intriguing to speculate that if Colonel Swinton had not recommended Bovington as the site of the new tank training centre in 1916 none of these buildings would be here.

But for that recommendation the original buildings might well have been dismantled at the end of the First World War; in fact, but for the invention of the tank, Bovington might still be a rifle range.

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BOVINGTON  
THE EARLY YEARS:  
1899 TO 1939  
BY  
THE TANK MUSEUM

## BOVINGTON GETS ORGANISED

### Bovington Gets Organised

As the winter of 1914 approached, Bovington Camp slowly became more organised. Soldiers trained and drilled. In their spare time they played football and visited the Young Mens Christian Association (YMCA). The YMCA sold stamps so they could write home.



### In Digs

The Army could not leave thousands of men living in tents. It was decided that huts should be built. All the carpenters in the areas were hired. Even with the help of soldiers, huts could not be built fast enough. Alternative shelter had to be found.



### Billets

Troops were billeted with families in Broadstone and Wimborne. The locals did not show a great deal of enthusiasm for this, but accepted that helping out was part of their patriotic duty. The troops remained in billets until March 1915, when the Bovington huts were finally completed.



### Trench Training

With the troops settled in their new huts, it was time for serious training to begin. A complex trench system was built on Gallows Hill and soldiers trained there day and night.



## IRON GIANTS

### Tanks Come to Bovington

In late 1915 and early 1916, the first tanks were built. They were called Little Willie and Mother. Their first testing ground was Elveden Forest, near Thetford in Norfolk.

To protect the secrecy of this new secret weapon, tank development was switched to Bovington. Bovington's terrain was varied enough to test the tanks and was situated near the south coast ports.



### Close Your Blinds!

The first tanks were transferred from Wool to Bovington in great secrecy. Local people were told to shut their curtains as the iron giants rumbled by.

An element of farce crept in. James Spicer of Bovington Farm was told to look away as a tank rolled past. He had towed a broken down tank into his farmyard, where it stayed for two days.





## OFF DUTY



### The Bovington Charabanc

By the early 1920's, the Camp's isolation had been solved.

Two serving Lance-Corporals, the Mansell brothers, ran and maintained the Bovington Charabanc. Three times a week the vehicle took parties to Poole or Bournemouth. The fare was 2 shillings (ten pence). An "out of pocket" soldier's fare would be docked from his wages.

The charabanc also brought girls to the camp for all-ranks dances. Not surprisingly, the girls weren't charged a bus fare.



### Off Duty

There was not much to do in Bovington. Football matches and cross country runs were organised. There were also concerts and long rambles across the Dorset countryside. Occasionally there were late passes to Poole, Bournemouth and Dorchester.





## PEACE TIME AND THE 1920s

### 1919: Peace Time

The Tank Corps' future was far from certain. It was decided that it should remain an independent unit, but that its strength should be reduced.

### Service Overseas

The peacetime roles of the Tank Corps were varied. Five battalions of tanks were posted to the German Rhineland and armoured car companies were sent to the Middle East.

### Controversy at Home

Armoured cars were also used in Ireland and in Britain during the industrial disputes of the early 1920s. These deployments were controversial. It was the first time that armoured vehicles had been used in peacetime disputes in Britain.



### The 1920s: A Decade of Change

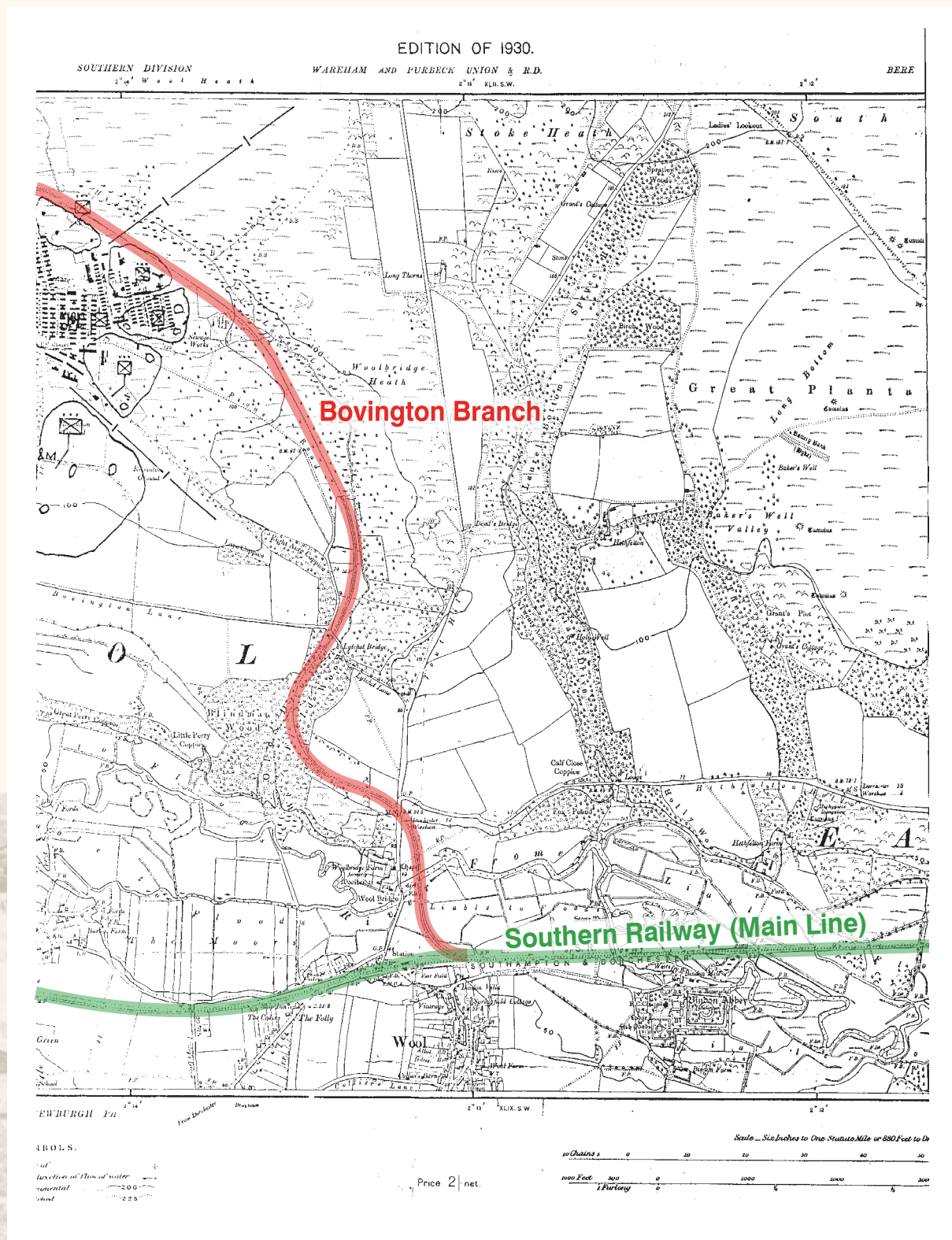
Bovington had been transformed by the end of the 1920s. In 1924, the War Office purchased land for housing from the Frampton Estate at the cost of £4,318.

Many of the camp's huts were converted to married quarters. Ten new houses had been built for senior officers.

Local people found an imaginative solution to the housing shortage. Many Bovington civilians lived in disused railway carriages. These could be purchased and put in place for £40.

There were other improvements. A library opened and better roads and gardens improved the appearance of the camp.

## THE ROUTE OF THE BOVINGTON RAILWAY





## THE BOVINGTON RAILWAY



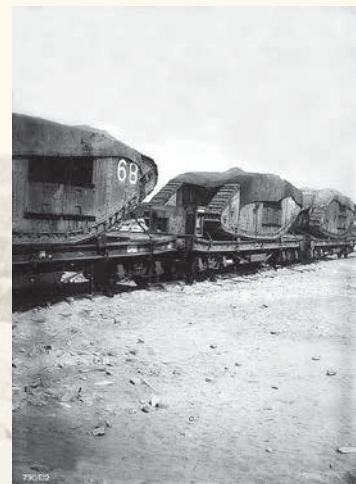
Damage to Wool Bridge

### The Railway Comes To Bovington

The Wool Bridge was constantly being damaged by tanks. It was decided that a spur line should be built from the main railway line at Wool to Bovington.

German prisoners-of-war built a bridge over the River Frome, 100 metres to the east of the existing bridge.

Soon the line was busy, transporting hundreds of derelict tanks on their journey from France to Bovington.



German prisoners used in the construction of railway bridge



The Railway Bridge over the Frome at Wool under construction



## BEGINNINGS

### Beginnings

People have lived at Bovington since Saxon times. Bovington means the "the farm of Bofa's descendants". In 1776, Bovington was part of the Bindon Abbey Estate. It was sold to the Frampton family of nearby Moreton House.



**The War Office buys Bovington**  
On 16th February 1899, the War Office paid Mary Frampton £4,300 for 1,000 acres of Dorset heathland. This was "to be used as a Rifle Range or for any other Military purpose".

### Work Starts

Over the next few months, a hundred men built a firing range 1,000 yards long and 200 yards wide. It contained "twenty butts of the most modern design".





## THE BREAKERS YARD



### War Memorials

Returning tanks were sent to towns all over Britain as war memorials. Nearly all of these tanks were removed in the Second World War, some for home defence, but many for scrap metal.

### Breaking Up Tanks

As tanks returned from France in the early 1920s, Bovington soon resembled a massive tank park. Some tanks were repaired and put back in service. The many that were not, were broken up for scrap.

The Sheffield and Slough Trading Companies were given the job of breaking up the tanks. It took a four-man team up to five days to take a tank to pieces.

## THE CINEMA

### Two Cinemas

In the 1920s Bovington had two cinemas. The older was a large, cold, wooden building. Even with its coal-powered heating customers needed coats to keep warm. Films were changed every three days and a ticket cost 21/2d (1p). The newer cinema was the "Garrison". This was more upmarket. It charged 3d (less than 2p) and had radiators, although these didn't always work.

### Play It Again, Mrs Coglam

The 1920s were the days of silent movies. At the "Garrison", Mrs Coglam played the accompanying music. She was a good player, but did not know of many tunes. She usually played with a woodbine cigarette hanging from her top lip.

### Rats, Peanuts And Orange Peel

If the cinema projectionist made a mistake, the screen would be showered with orange peel and peanuts. Both cinemas suffered from rat infestation, which rats lived on the discarded peanuts and orange peel.



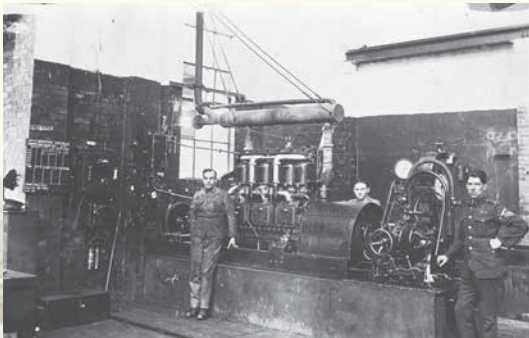
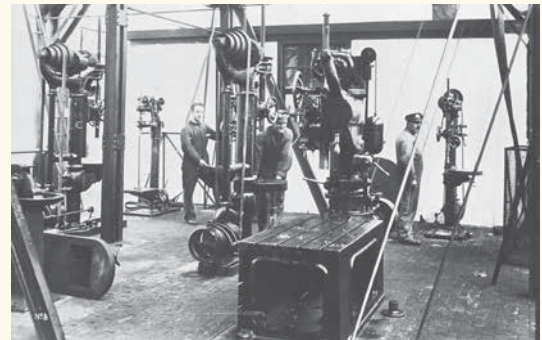
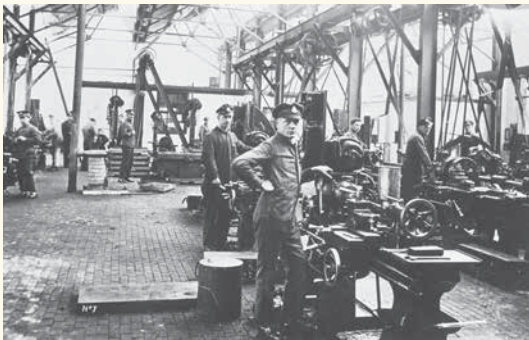


## THE NEW WORKSHOPS



### A Variety of Trades

These images demonstrate the variety of trades needed to keep tanks operational. Alongside the photograph of milling machines and lathes are photographs of carpenters, tin-workers, electricians, welders and smiths. The work of the drawing office too is recorded.



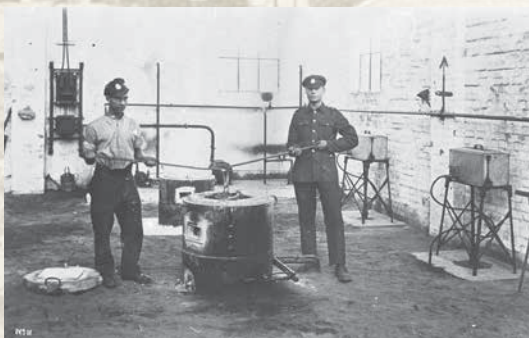
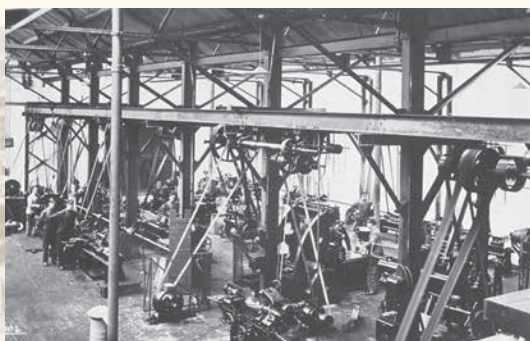
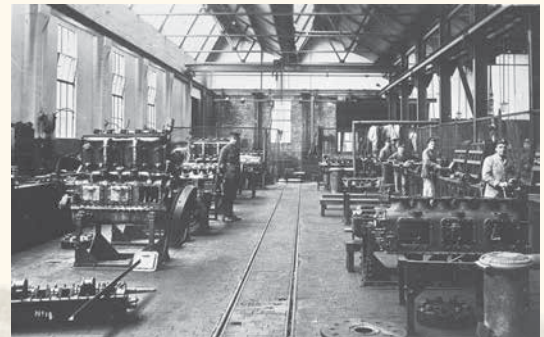
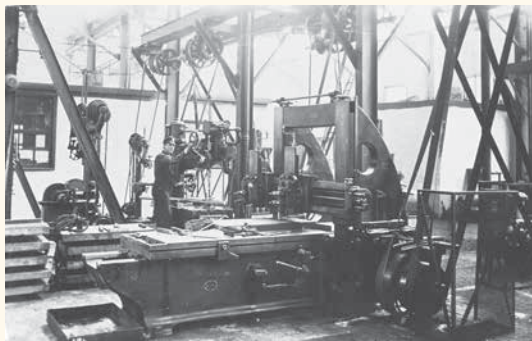


### The New Workshops

In 1919, Bovington's workshops were extended. A new permanent structure replaced the wartime tents and huts.

The new workshops were situated in the "dip" between the current guardroom and the traffic lights. It was serviced by the new railway line from Wool, which curved around from the east.

### BOVINGTON THE EARLY YEARS: 1899 TO 1939





## WORLD WAR ONE

### World War One

The First World War started in August 1914. Britain needed to recruit many thousands of volunteers to increase the Army from its peacetime number of 150,000. 500,000 men volunteered in the first month alone. The army could not cope with these numbers.



### War Comes To Bovington

In September 1914, new recruits were posted to Bovington. Soon, 11,000 recruits were sleeping in tents or in the open. These troops made up the new 17th Infantry Battalion. They had no uniforms or military equipment. Neither the army nor its suppliers could meet the needs of the new recruits.

### Old Uniforms, Obsolete Guns

At the end of September the first uniforms and weapons arrived. The uniforms were old and patched. The guns were out of date and met with derision from the troops.

The 17th Battalion received modern equipment in September 1915, just before it left for France.



### READY! AT BOVINGTON CAMP, WOOL.

I'm in the wilds of Dorset,  
A lovely spot, 'tis true,  
But I feel sad and lonely  
Because I think of YOU.  
You're far away; yet near me  
In thought and mind and heart,  
I know that you are anxious,  
But I must bear my part.  
At Bovington I'm training hard,  
And feeling very fit,  
Preparing for the time when I  
Must do my "little bit."  
We're out to help old England,  
And when I'm safely through,  
I shan't be slack in getting back

To *Harry* home and YOU.  
*from George*

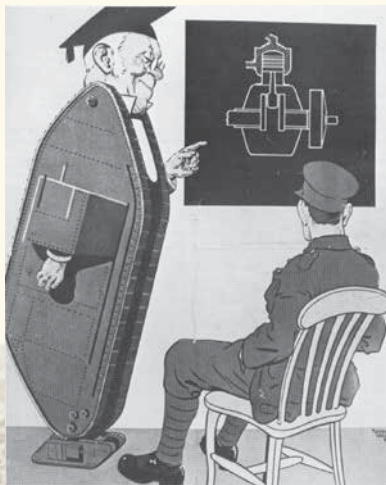
## THE ROYAL TANK CORPS

### 1917: Bovington Grows Again

In 1917, the temporary canvas workshops were replaced. The new workshop was a steel framed building, with a concrete floor and crane. The instructors were constantly on the lookout for mechanics. Recruits with technical skills ended up in the workshops.

### The Tank Corps is Born

At the end of 1917 there were 300 tanks at Bovington. The Machine Gun Corps, Heavy Gun Section doubled in size and became the Tank Corps. Once again the camp was upgraded, with new repair bays, a forge and coppersmiths. A narrow gauge railway was built for moving engines. This proved invaluable in wet and muddy weather.



### The Tank Driving & Maintenance School

In 1923, Bovington became the Tank Driving & Maintenance School. The numbers of trainees were greatly reduced. Quieter times gave the School the freedom to upgrade the skills of its instructors.

### New Name, New Cap & New Badge

The Tank Corps became the Royal Tank Corps in 1923, when King George V issued a Royal Warrant conferring the new name. In 1925, the distinctive black beret and tank-and-laurel badge appeared.



## THE TANK TRAINING CENTRE

### **'The Wilds of Dorset'**

In the autumn of 1916, Brigadier-General Gore-Anley became the first Commander of the Bovington Tank Training Centre.

### **Training for Tanks**

The new tank crews trained in vehicle maintenance, map reading, weapons instruction, physical training and night operations.



### **Pigeon Pie**

Tank crews were also trained in handling pigeons. As First World War radios were not portable, carrier pigeons were seen as the solution. Crews found the engines' fumes made the pigeons groggy. The pigeons sometimes became emergency rations.



### **Team Work**

Tank crews soon learned the importance of team work. Each crew was responsible for the up-keep of its vehicle. Tanks were not easy vehicles to keep running. In action, survival depended on working together.

After three months training the crews were sent to France, to be replaced by the next training intake.

### **'The Wilds of Dorset'**

The new tank recruits were not impressed with Bovington. Many arrived in snowy weather and found unheated huts awaiting them. Many were not impressed with the tanks either. They thought them slow and unreliable. These teething problems would have to be solved before the tank could become an effective fighting machine.

## TINTOWN



### Going Down The Shops

As the camp grew, so did the demand for shops. George Keene and Herbert Smith opened rival shops. Both had previously traded in Bovington from businesses elsewhere. Herbert Smith took over the shop run by the Purchase brothers.

### Tintown

The civilian area of Bovington became known as Tintown. This is the area where the village's modern shops stand. Tintown housed a hairdresser, barber, cobbler, chemist, tailor, grocer, blacksmith, butcher and five cafes. There was also two billiard saloons, two cinemas, two cycle shops, a fish and chip shop, a garage and a laundry.





## WOOL TRIALS

### The Wool Trials

In 1925 and 1927 the Army held vehicle trials at Gallows Hill. The trials tested the cross-country capabilities of vehicles for military use. Although some tracked vehicles were involved, the contest was primarily between six-wheeled and half-tracked vehicles.

### 1925: "The Death Of The Wheel"

At the 1925 Trials, the half-track which combined front wheels with a tracked rear was triumphant. The half-track vehicle's creator, a Monsieur Qegresse threw his hat on the air and shouted "La morte de la roue" therefore "the death of the wheel".



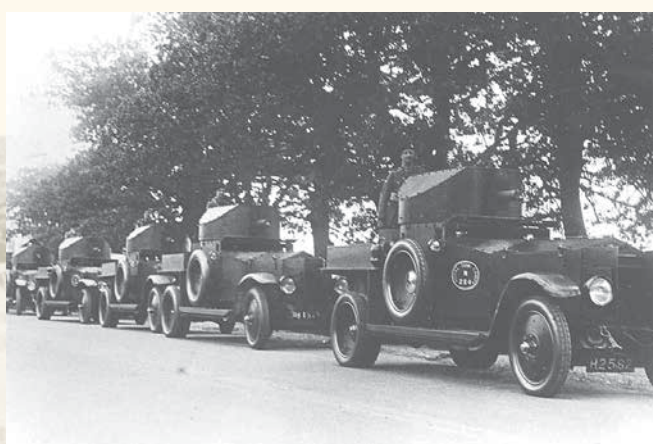
### 1927: The Wheel Fights Back

The Army were not convinced by the half-track. Another trial was held in 1927. This time the six-wheeler triumphed. From this time the Army concentrated on six wheeled vehicles.





## THEN & NOW





## ROYAL VISITS



### **King Amanullah**

The Camp received two royal visits in 1928. In March, King Amanullah of Afghanistan visited. Then, as now, his country had an important role in world politics. King Amanullah had signed treaties with both Britain and Russia.



### **King George V**

In April 1928, King George V visited Bovington. As the photographs show, he was given an extensive tour. The King and officers of the Royal Tank Corps are wearing the new Corps beret. There was some resistance to the beret when it was introduced. Many thought it was an affront to their "masculine dignity".





## THE 1930s

### The 1930s

The early 1930s was a period of relative calm at Bovington. The quality of recruits improved in these years. Britain was suffering from terrible unemployment and the Army only accepted the best. To many able young men from poorer homes, the Army offered secure and stable employment.



### The Road To War

From 1937, the pace quickened as the world slid towards war. In April 1939, the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) was formed. The RAC comprised the Royal Tank Corps and the mechanised cavalry regiments.



## LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

### **T.E. Lawrence: "Lawrence of Arabia"**

T.E. Lawrence was the most famous person to serve in the Tank Corps. In 1923, he joined the Tank Corps as Corporal Shaw. He was trying to hide from the fame his desert exploits had earned him.

Previously an officer in the Royal Air Force, Lawrence did not enjoy his time in the Tank Corps. He said "The army is unspeakable. I hate them and the life here". When not on duty he could be found at his cottage at nearby Clouds Hill.

### **After the Tank Corps**

In 1925, Lawrence returned to the RAF. He later retired to Clouds Hill in 1935. Weeks later he was killed in a motorcycle accident near his home. Lawrence of Arabia is buried in Moreton Churchyard.



## BOVINGTON SCHOOL



### **Bovington Children**

As the camp grew, so did the number of the children. By 1921, it is said there were over 500 children in Bovington. Large numbers of service children were educated in nearby village schools, but many had to be transported to Poole.

### **A New School for Bovington**

In 1922, the Army converted a military building into a school. Bovington School opened in 1923. The school had four teachers. A disused parade ground was used as a playground. A second classroom and teachers' quarters were soon added. Alongside the normal subjects, older boys were given lessons in mechanics.

HISTORY OF THE ARMOUR CENTRE  
AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO  
THE UNITED KINGDOM'S  
DEFENCE CAPABILITY





## HISTORY AND ROLE

In June 1916, the training camp for the Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps moved from Thetford in Norfolk to Bovington and Lulworth in south Dorset. The goal was to create a single centre of excellence for the development of armoured fighting vehicles and for the training of their commanders and crewmen. It was at Bovington and Lulworth that the earliest tanks, used

to such devastating effect in World War 1, were developed and modified. It was here also that forward thinking soldiers worked with industry throughout the 1920s and 1930s to design the weapon systems and tactics which changed the nature of the 20th Century warfare and laid the foundations for armoured victory of the Gulf War and the effective employment of AFVs in Peace Support Operations in Bosnia.

## A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

At the Armour Centre the AFV Training Group is the British Army's Centre of Excellence for Armoured Fighting Vehicle training. Since its inception in 1916, the Group has made a vital contribution to the nation's defence effort by consistently producing the highly trained Commanders and Crewmen who provide the Army's front line armoured capability.

With a strong emphasis on military ethos, the Group delivers unbeatable standards of Training through the employment of a variety of modern training methods. These include the wide use of the latest computer simulation technology and an effective combination of military and private sector expertise. The Group trains some 3,500 soldiers annually in its three schools. This include training the Instructors who ensure that armoured skills are continually kept up to date throughout the Royal Armoured Corps' regiments.



## THE AFV TRAINING GROUP AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE ARMY'S TRAINING EFFORT

In 1995 the Armour Centre became an Operating Division of the Army Training and Recruiting Agency (ATRA) and is accountable to its Chief Executive (Major-General).

Within the Armour Centre, the AFV Training Group is focused on the second part of the Agency's mission: to

recruit and train young people to become the best soldiers in the world.

ATRA is a defence agency of the Ministry of Defence and an integral part of the Adjutant General's Training and Personnel Command.



# CHRONOLOGY

- 1899** The War Office purchases 1000 acres of heathland in parishes of Bovington, Turners Puddle, Affpuddle, Wool and other Dorset areas. Used by many battalions in the decade prior to the First World War.
- 1907 - 1910** The War Office progressively enlarges camp and extends by 315 acres.
- 1914** Infantry Training Camp
- 1916** The War Office decides on Bovington as location for new tank training. The tank training centre is formed, run by Heavy Section, Machine Gun Corps. The Gunnery School is established at Lulworth. Pigeon training in lieu of wireless. Depot workshops established.
- 1917** The Heavy Section becomes Tank Corps, expanded from 9 to 18 battalions. Workshops are expanded to cope with over 300 tanks at Bovington.

**1919** The Central Schools consist of:

- Headquarters
- Machine Gun School
- Tank School
- Signalling School
- Intelligence School
- Revolver School
- Anti-Gas School
- Bombing School
- Pigeon School
- Compass School



- 1921** Tank Fitters Training Shop opened in Central Workshops to train properly qualified tank mechanics.
- 1922** Economics result in Central Schools rationalised and merged into:
- Headquarters
  - Gunnery School
  - Tank Driving & Maintenance School
  - Armoured Car School
- 1923** TE Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) enlists in Tank Corps at Bovington Camp under the name of “TE Shaw”.
- 1920s-30s** Development of Bovington Camp and Bovington Village.
- 1936** The Central Workshops engage in experimental testing of new vehicles leading to later establishment of Equipment Trials Wing. Royal Signals contingent attached to Royal Tank Central School to form Wireless Wing.

**1937** The Army Armoured Fighting Vehicle School is established at Bovington and Lulworth to replace Royal Tank Corps Central School. It comprises of Driving and Maintenance and Wireless wings at Bovington and Gunnery wing at Lulworth.



**1939** Formation of Royal Armoured Corps. Bindon Range at Lulworth was the only fully equipped AFV range in the UK.

**1943** The village of Tyneham is taken over by the MOD for D-Day preparations.

**1939-1945** 35 main AFV types are introduced to Bovington and Lulworth.

**1945** Driving and Maintenance School is extended to include the Royal Artillery Wing in order to provide training with tracked self-propelled guns.

**1948** RAC Depot re-established at Bovington. Title changed from Central Schools / Bovington Garrison to HQ RAC Centre.

**1949-1954** Army acquires freehold of 6313 acres of land, including Tyneham.

**1951** The School of Tank Technology (STT) is relocated to Bovington from Chobham. It provides courses in Mechanical Gunnery and later in Guided Weapons. It is redesignated as the Armour School in 1966.

**1952** Formation of Boys Squadron RAC, later to become Junior Leaders Regiment.



**1960's** In the early 1960's the RAC Centre comprised:

- Headquarters
- Driving & Maintenance (D&M) including Royal Artillery & Royal Engineer Wings
- Signal School
- Gunnery School (at Lulworth)

- Tactical School (including a Combat Development Cell, which later transferred to HQ DRAC)
- School of Tank Technology (Later to become the Armour School), including the Tank Museum
- Equipment Trials Wing (later to become the Armoured Trials and Development Unit therefore ATDU)
- Publications Wing (later to become Training Development & Publications Wing then Media Support Wing and subsequently Training Innovation Development Group)
- Junior Leaders Regiment, RAC
- RAC Depot
- RAC Team, Army Works Study Group

and the following units were also situated at Bovington and Lulworth:

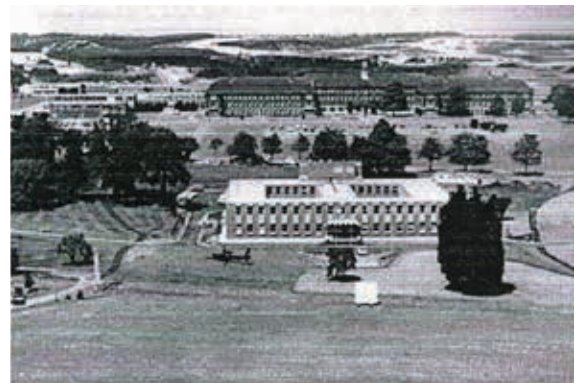
- Medical Reception Station (MRS), Bovington
- 18 Command Workshop, REME
- 16 Army Education Centre
- Civilian Establishment Pay Office
- 15 Independent Company, WRAC
- Married Quarters Administrative Staff
- Area and Garrison Works Offices

**1960-1979** Period of rebuilding in Bovington including:

- Driving and Maintenance Wing (1961)
- Driving and Maintenance Infantry Wing (1963)
- HQ RAC Centre (1977)

**1963** The last National Servicemen left the Army, and the much-reduced training requirement led to shrinking of the communities at Bovington and Lulworth.

**1965** HQ Director Armour Royal Armoured Corps (DRAC) moved from Whitehall to Lulworth, and Junior Leaders Regiment moved into purpose-built accommodation at Stanley Barracks.



**1966** The School of Tank Technology became the Armour School.

**1968** The Queens Royal Irish Hussars became the first RAC Centre Regiment, assuming administrative responsibility for the RAC Centre.

**1969** RAC Memorial Hall opens.

**1978** New headquarters building opened after nearly three years of construction, accommodating HQ DRAC, HQ RAC Centre, the Tactics School, a Court Martial Centre, Civilian Pay office and some other units.

- 1979**            A new workshop opened on the site of the existing 18 Command Workshop REME, later to become 18 Base Workshop and then ABRO Bovington.
  
- 1987**            The Armour School closes under rationalisation. Armoured Technology training was moved to the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham.
  
- 1993**            The Tactics School moved to Warminster to become part of the Combined Arms Training Centre.
  
- 1995**            Command of RAC Centre is passed from Director RAC to Commander RAC Centre as training functions become part of Army Training and Recruiting Agency.
  
- 1998**            Private sector takes over selected non-tactical training, AFV Maintenance and other Garrison support services under contract as part of MOD while Competing for Quality initiative.
  
- 1999**            The RAC Centre is renamed Armour Centre, which name still remains today, because in its current role as an operating division of the Army Training & Recruitment Agency (ATRA), it was providing training in tracked armoured vehicles to the Field Army in general rather than just to the Royal Armoured Corps.
  
- 2000-2008**      Since the Strategic Defence Review, the Armour Centre has gone through many changes, becoming an army core site: moving under command of the Army Recruiting & Training Division, major construction of soldier's accommodation & training facilities buildings. In 2008 the Bovington Training Area came under the command of Defence Training Estates, now the Defence Infrastructure Organisation.

A full account of the RAC Centre's history can be found in "Bovington Tanks" written by George and Anne Forty (published by the Dorset Publishing Company, 1988, ISBN 0-902129-97-X), available to purchase from the Tank Museum and booksellers.







# BOVINGTON

## THE HOME OF THE TANK

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